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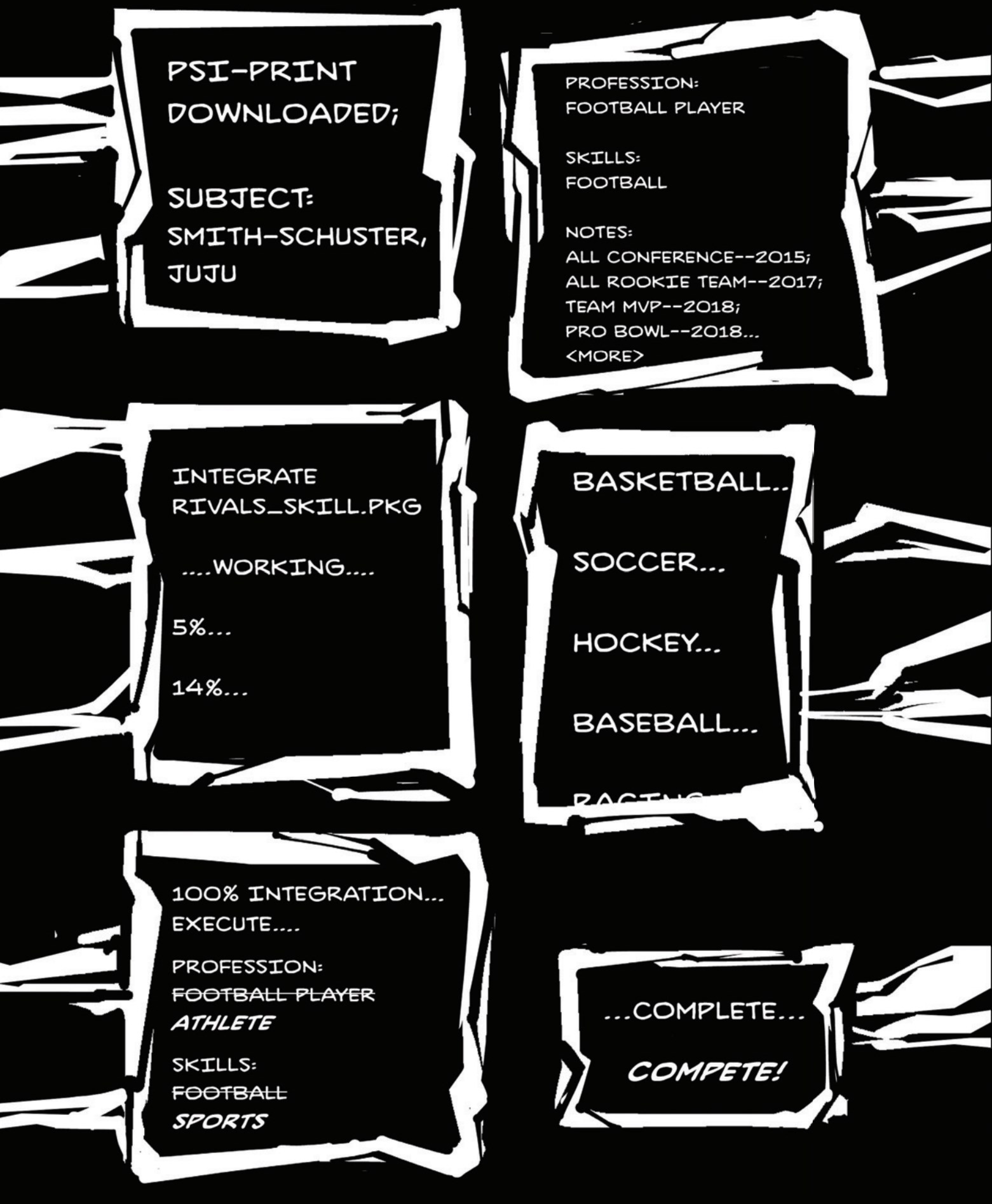
THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

Movers
Movers


PSI-PRINT DOWNLOADED;
SUBJECT: SMITH-SCHUSTER, JUJU
PROFESSION: FOOTBALL PLAYER
SKILLS: FOOTBALL
NOTES: ALL CONFERENCE--2015; ALL ROOKIE TEAM--2017; TEAM MVP--2018; PRO BOWL--2018... <MORE>
INTEGRATE RIVALS_SKILL.PKG
....WORKING....
5%...
14%...
BASKETBALL..
SOCCER...
HOCKEY...
BASEBALL...
RACI
100% INTEGRATION... EXECUTE....
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ANDREW REINER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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@Andrew_Reiner

Time Matters

How much of my life has been spent looking at video game load screens? I don't want to know the exact number of days, weeks, and months, but I have a feeling with a minute load here and 30-second load there, a significant portion of my life has been wasted looking at still images, spinning logos, and helpful tips. Thanks to next-generation gaming, the days of looking at these screens may finally be behind us.

This month's cover story for Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales carries the news that the entire game will be load-free on PlayStation 5. If you play the game on PlayStation 4, you'll see those subway sequences with Miles checking his cell phone as the game loads up the next area. For last month's Kena: Bridge of Spirits cover story, we saw that game load in just two seconds from the PlayStation 5 system menu. Other PlayStation 5 developers I've talked to say that their games load so fast that they can't even display a graphic that people will be able to make out before the game begins.

While I haven't seen any Xbox Series X/S games running on the hardware yet, Microsoft is also touting dramatically reduced load times for its new generation. Diminished load times may not sound like a big selling point for a $500 console, but when you see it in practice and realize just how much of your life can go to other things (like playing more games), it's one of the most important upgrades we've seen in generations.

I remember making the transition from the load-free Super Nintendo and Genesis days to PlayStation and thought it was weird that we had to wait to play, but I gradually grew accustomed to it. Going into this current generation, even long load times started to feel normal.

If Sony and Microsoft can deliver on the lightning-quick loads for most games, this generation of machines will be a game-changer just for this one reason alone. We won't need to sit around and wait. We'll get right to the action. We'll just have to figure out another way to continue checking our cell phones and Twitter every 10 minutes of our lives.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

38 **Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales**
A new Spider-Man steps into the spotlight in Insomniac's PlayStation 5 debut. Fire off venom powers, explore Harlem, and get the full scoop on one of the most anticipated launch games of the next generation.
by Andrew Reiner

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10 The Dawn Of A New Age
Still trying to wrap your head around the systems and games that will define the launch of a new generation? We've got you covered with our comprehensive guide.

16 What Was The Story Of This Generation?
Even as gamers celebrate the arrival of the new, we look back on the trends of the current generation, with perspective from the developers who helped to shape it.

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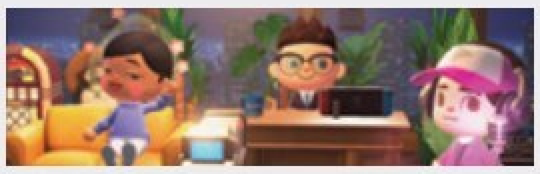

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Who ever thought a talk show set in the world of Animal Crossing would take off and go viral? Read our interview with Gary Whitta, the creator of *Animal Talking.*

23 Hardware Review: Oculus Quest 2
The original Quest freed VR players from wired connections. Its successor makes everything even better, and emerges as the headset to beat.

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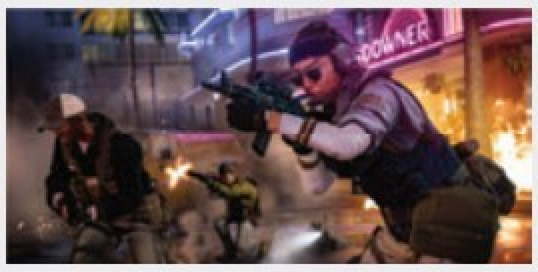
Our yearly curated selection of toys, tech, tabletop games, media, and more is here to help you find great gifts for the season ahead.

54 Assassin's Creed Valhalla
The ultimate Viking fantasy is almost here. Read everything you need to know about Ubisoft's ambitious new adventure.

58 Immortals Fenyx Rising
Over-the-top action and classic Greek mythology are mashed together in this stunning new open-world game.

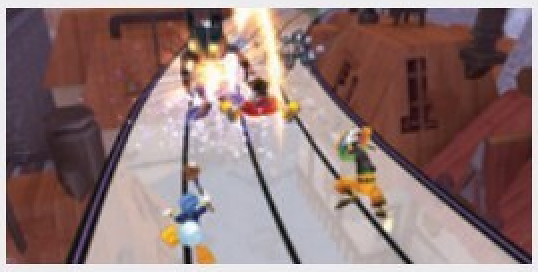


62 Call Of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

We break down the multiplayer suite in the next installment of the blockbuster franchise.

64 Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time Remake

The classic action/adventure gets a next-gen facelift.

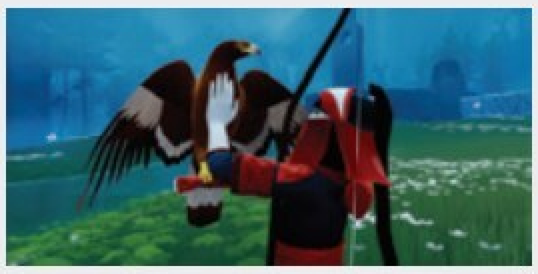


65 Kingdom Hearts Melody Of Memory

The soaring music of the beloved franchise takes center stage in this new rhythm-focused installment.

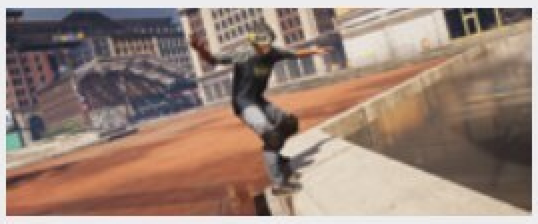
66 Hyrule Warriors: Age Of Calamity

Koei Tecmo is working directly with Nintendo to craft this prequel story set 100 years before Breath of the Wild.



67 The Pathless

The makers of Abzû are prepping a beautiful new game about an archer, an eagle, and the mythic journey they undertake together.



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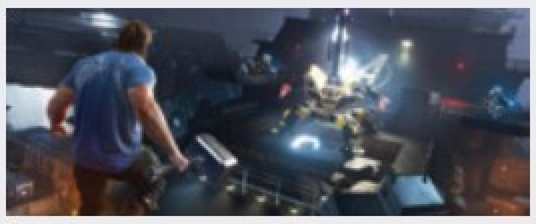
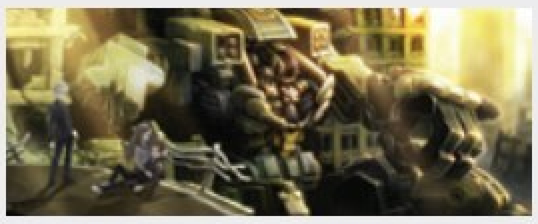
The skateboarding games that defined a genre are back with a striking remake that grinds the rail between new and old.



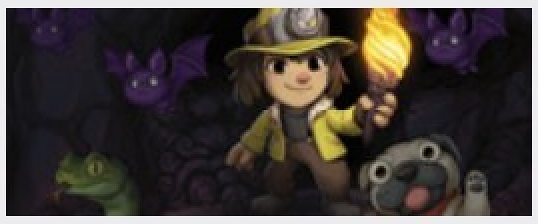
74 Marvel's Avengers

Earth's mightiest heroes step up to do battle in Crystal Dynamics' bold and different take on Marvel's most iconic characters.



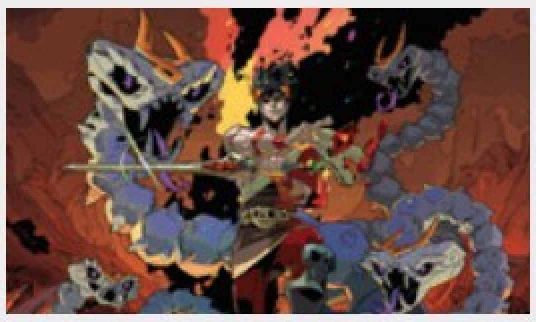
77 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim

Vanillaware turns its artistic eye to the sci-fi genre in this hybrid game, mixing visual novel techniques with tactical battles.



78 Spelunky 2

The "just one more run" mantra guides the fun of this addictive and challenging sequel, which manages to outdo even its predecessor.



81 Hades

Supergiant Games hits the mark again in its roguelite twist on Greek mythology.

82 Genshin Impact

Don't let the free-to-play model fool you. With incredible art and music, a deep character and leveling system, and a compelling open world to explore, this new action/RPG came out of nowhere, impressing at every turn.

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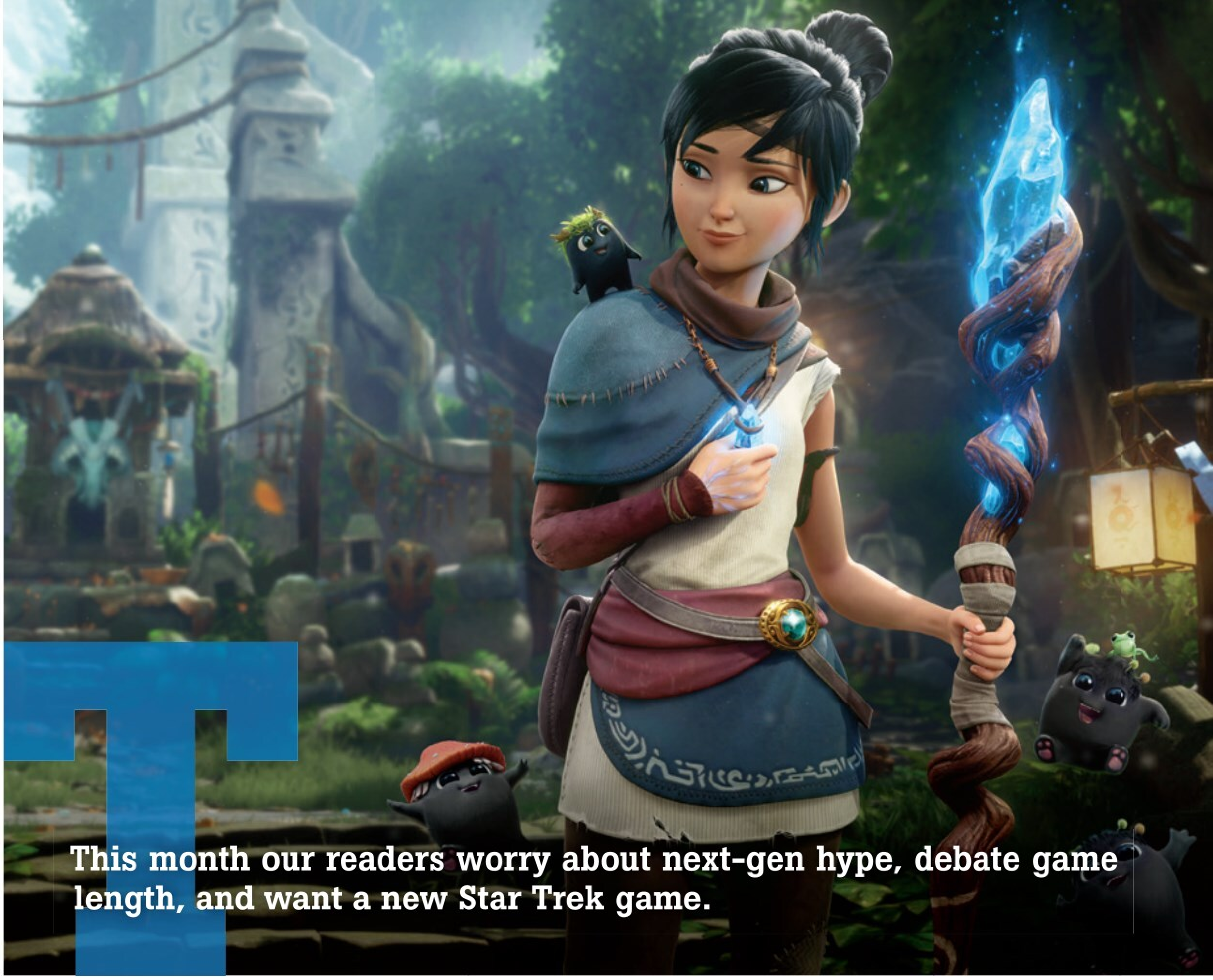
feedback



This month our readers worry about next-gen hype, debate game length, and want a new Star Trek game.

Kena: Bridge Of Spirits

I love seeing unlikely teams rise up and deliver a huge game, and that's what it appears Ember Lab is doing with Kena: Bridge of Spirits. The article makes it sound like a magical experience. We need more games that have a vibe of the Studio Ghibli films, and I'm getting that loud and clear from Kena. I can't wait to play it! I now just need to find a way to ensure I get a PlayStation 5 at launch. Wish me luck, *GI*!

Samantha Howard
Cannon Beach, OR

As much as I want to love the Rot in Kena: Bridge of Spirits, their name gives me pause. I bet it's going to be one of those stories where you fall in love with the little guys and then they turn on you and you are forced to either kill them to save the forest or let them live and doom everyone else. Darn you, Ember Lab. Please don't make me choose!

Joseph Ferrel
Kennebunkport, ME

Kena: Bridge of Spirits is now my most anticipated next-gen game. I plan on getting both a PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X at launch (yes, I'm one of those people), and I intend on starting my next-gen career with Assassin's Creed Valhalla, Marvel's Avengers (I'm waiting to play it on the new machines), and then I hope my next game will be Kena: Bridge of Spirits. Thank you so much for the amazing article on the game. I loved the trailer from Sony's livestream this summer, but I had no idea if that was real gameplay or not. Now I know exactly what to expect from this amazing looking game!

Deandra Kanu
via email

Kena: Bridge of Spirits captured our imaginations and looks like one of the most promising new adventures for PlayStation 5. Like many of you, we can't wait to see how it turns out. The day we get to find out has sadly been pushed back. Kena is no longer a 2020 release and has slid back into 2021. Here's hoping it arrives early in the year.

Lack Of Hype

Does it feel like new-gen hype season? Before with console releases, it felt like impending glory right around the corner at the sound of a new-gen released console, however, now (understandably given the circumstances of 2020's myriad surprises) it doesn't seem to hit home the way it used to.

I'm an absolute Sony fanboy through and through, and even found myself on the ledge when it came to the lack of console-release hype. Lack of solid information, no clear sign of release date or even a smidget of information in regards to how much cash I'd have to shell out to get that plastic to my house. I wanted to know what you guys thought? Are you having a hype dilemma or maybe I'm just not as stoked as I used to be in my younger years.

Scott Sinard
Game guy from Florida

The messaging surrounding PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X has been oddly confusing and lacking vital information. It wasn't until we saw a PlayStation 5 in action for our Kena: Bridge of Spirits cover story last month that we realized just how fast this machine is and how greatly it cuts down on load times. This is just one demonstration we saw, but if it holds true to all games, the blazing speed will be a game changer in the console space. Gone are the days of long load screens. Now that we know the prices and dates of both machines, excitement has been steadily building, but the wider public needs to see more demonstrations of games in action to truly grasp what they may be buying.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Collections Or Remasters

With the release of the Super Mario 3D All-Stars collection, I've seen lots of discourse on the internet as to whether the games featured in the collection are remasters or just ports. I think that these discussions have merit on both sides, but I'm of the opinion that the games on this collection are remastered. They all have higher resolutions, improved aspect ratios, and for Galaxy, there's dual joy-con support to control the game a la the Wii remote and nunchuck. Furthermore, my opinion of remasters goes by Scott the Woz's measure of what a remaster is, that being games with improved visuals, thus, making the collection remasters. However, what makes it a remaster or port is obviously subjective, so what do you guys think?

Gable Coe
via email

We don't want to complicate matters, but what if there was a third type called enhanced. The games in the Mario collection don't have enough changes to truly warrant the remaster billing, but are enhanced to a degree to take advantage of the Switch hardware and design.

Fall Guys

I have no idea how Fall Guys became a hit. Prior to launch, when I looked at the screenshots and trailer, it just looked like a weird kiddy game with questionable character movement. I know I wasn't alone in my thinking. NO ONE was talking about Fall Guys before it released. Here's my question: If Fall Guys wasn't offered as a free download for PS Plus subscribers, do you think it would have taken the world by storm? I don't think so. Given how many players are needed per round, I have a feeling it would have disappeared quietly. This seems to be an instance of a game being placed on a stage and people downloading it and giving it a shot because it was served up to them.

Eric Burns
Martinsburg, WV

You may be right about Fall Guys' path to success on day one, but given how fun and different it is, we have a feeling it would have been a hit no matter what – it may have just taken longer to get there. Look at Fortnite, a game that was moderately successful, and then over the course of a few weeks became a juggernaut once its battle royale mode was released. As a result of Fall Guys being one of 2020's biggest games, more developers and publishers will likely try to partner with Sony to launch new titles on PS Plus.

Starfield

It feels like forever ago that Bethesda and game creator Todd Howard announced Starfield. Being a big Fallout and Elder Scrolls fan, it immediately became my most anticipated game. I've now waited two years and have heard nothing more about it. When Sony and Microsoft started showing off games on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, I thought we'd for sure get a second look at Starfield during one of these livestreams, but it's apparently drifting aimlessly in space. Did it get canceled?

Jonathan Williamson
Dallas, TX

A Bethesda spokesperson confirms Starfield is still in development at Bethesda Game Studios. Bethesda announced it early, but it was never slated to release any time near the announcement. We're hoping we learn more about it soon.

In the meantime, this month brought the shocking news that Microsoft has purchased Bethesda and its parent company, Zenimax Media. It's safe to assume that such a change will have a big effect on any additional details regarding the much-anticipated Starfield.

Mass Effect: Star Trek

There's a lot of great stuff happening to Star Trek right now. I'm madly in love with Discovery and can't wait to see where Picard goes next. We also have several other Star Trek series and movies on the way. What about games? Most attempts to turn Star Trek into games have failed miserably. The MMO is popular, sure, but why not just wholesale copy Mass Effect and give me a choice-driven Star Trek RPG? Replace Commander Shepard with the Captain of my design, give me an Enterprise and let me explore the universe to find missions. Why hasn't this happened yet?

Andrew Dagic
via email

We fully support this idea, and hope a developer secures the Star Trek license and makes it happen. Just imagine the choices: Tribbles or no Tribbles.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Marvel's Avengers gets a lot of things right, especially The Hulk. Should they spin him off into a standalone game?"

That's not a bad idea. Given just how nicely designed most of the characters are, they could probably leap into their own games. For now, though, let's just ask for more missions that they get to participate in.

"Pre-ordering a PS5 was way too stressful of an event. I'll probably cry when the box arrives on my doorstep when I remember what I went through. Sold out. Sold out. Sold out. Jackpot!"

The surprise of pre-orders going live created chaos and irritated a lot of people. We have a feeling that wasn't how the pre-order rollout was supposed to go down.

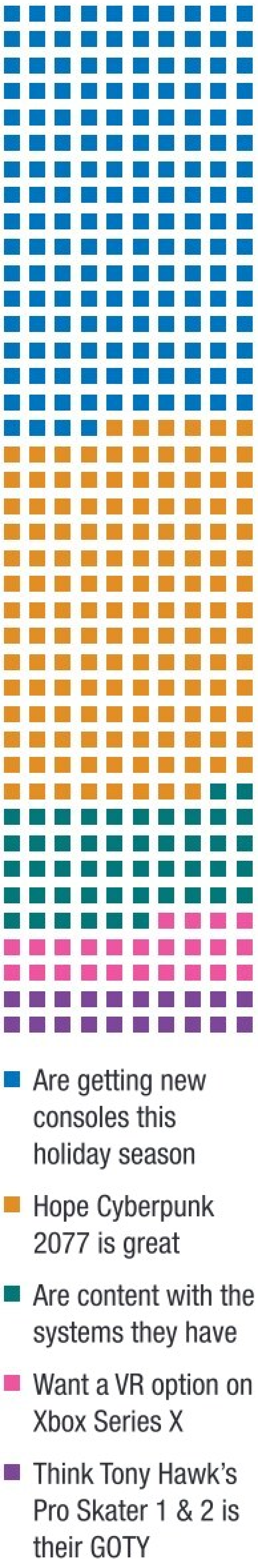
Best Comment:

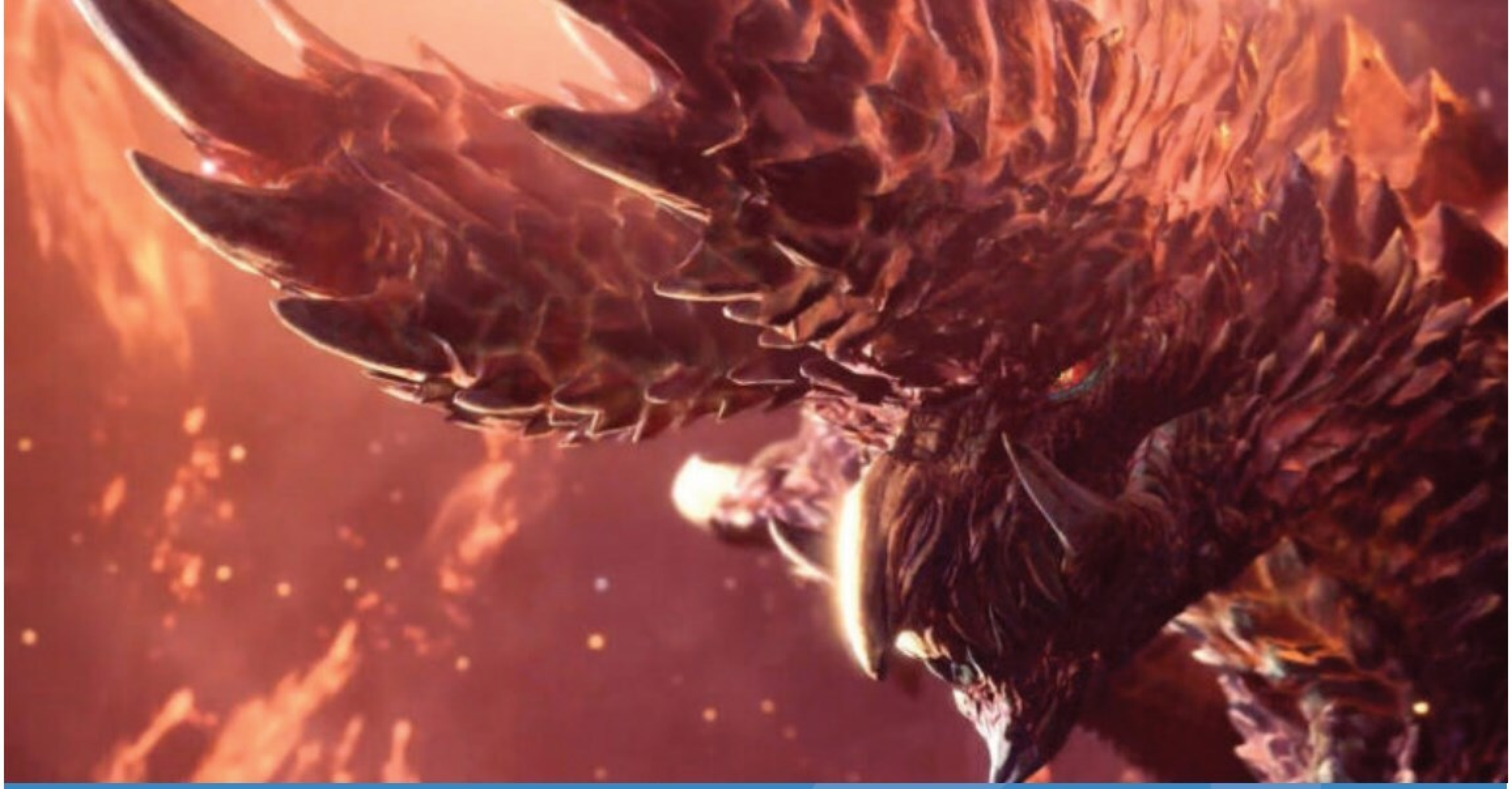
"Have you ever pooped your pants while playing Call of Duty: Black Ops?"

Question Of The Month:

Did you pre-order a PlayStation 5 or Xbox Series X? If yes, what are you excited for? If no, why?

On Your Mind





Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers what their greatest gaming accomplishment was. Here's what they had to share …

Reaching the ultimate rank of Grand Champion in Rocket League was a moment that I'll never forget, and I don't think any other gaming achievement will surpass that feat. I remember taking to the sticks back on the PS4 when it came up for free on PS+. My brothers and I discovered the simple enjoyment of knocking a ball around with a car, but it didn't stop there.Rocket League is an interesting game in that way because it's simple fun for everyone, but the skill cap is impressively high. I became engrossed in getting better, refining my mechanical skill and I remember telling my younger brother "one day I'll be Grand Champion, you'll see." This was only for self perseverance of course but it wasn't until four years later that I actually achieved that dream after more than 1,700 hours of gameplay. I'm by no means the best, or a prodigy, but to achieve the ultimate rank of Grand Champion after having dreamt of it for years, this was undeniably my greatest accomplishment in a game.

Digtron
Canton, MI

The greatest accomplishment I ever had in a video game will likely have to go to my first-time solo hunting Alatreon in Monster Hunter World: Iceborne. The feeling of killing your first Black Dragon is impossible to describe and I felt like a god afterward. Until I learned Capcom is adding Fatalis, the god of all monsters, in October.

Preston Smith
St. Louis, MO

My greatest accomplishment in the video game world has to be getting 1,000 kills with the Sentry Gun killstreak in Modern Warfare 2. Spent so many days of my summer just to have a Title and Emblem that none of my other friends had.

KernelCory
Dallas, TX

My greatest video game accomplishment was achieving my very first platinum trophy when I completed Dark Souls. It was a feeling that is still indescribable.

Kel
via email

Game Length

With the recent conversation of game length becoming somewhat mainstream with even big time developers now commenting on it, would you pay the same price for a game that is 10-20 hours shorter? Would Red Dead Redemption 2 still have been as good of a deal? Does part of your value for these games include game length?

Taylorwagen
Mesa, AZ

Value and quality are two very different (but important) things to consider when deciding what games to play. There's nothing wrong with wanting to get the most out of your time and money, but remember that appreciating great games isn't just about optimizing your hours of entertainment per dollar. For our reviews, we don't look at length in terms of "long games are better than short games." Instead, we weigh how well the length matches with the experience. A sprawling, 200-hour game isn't a good value if the content isn't fun, and a compact 10-hour game can be packed with clever moments and fun characters.

1

WINNER

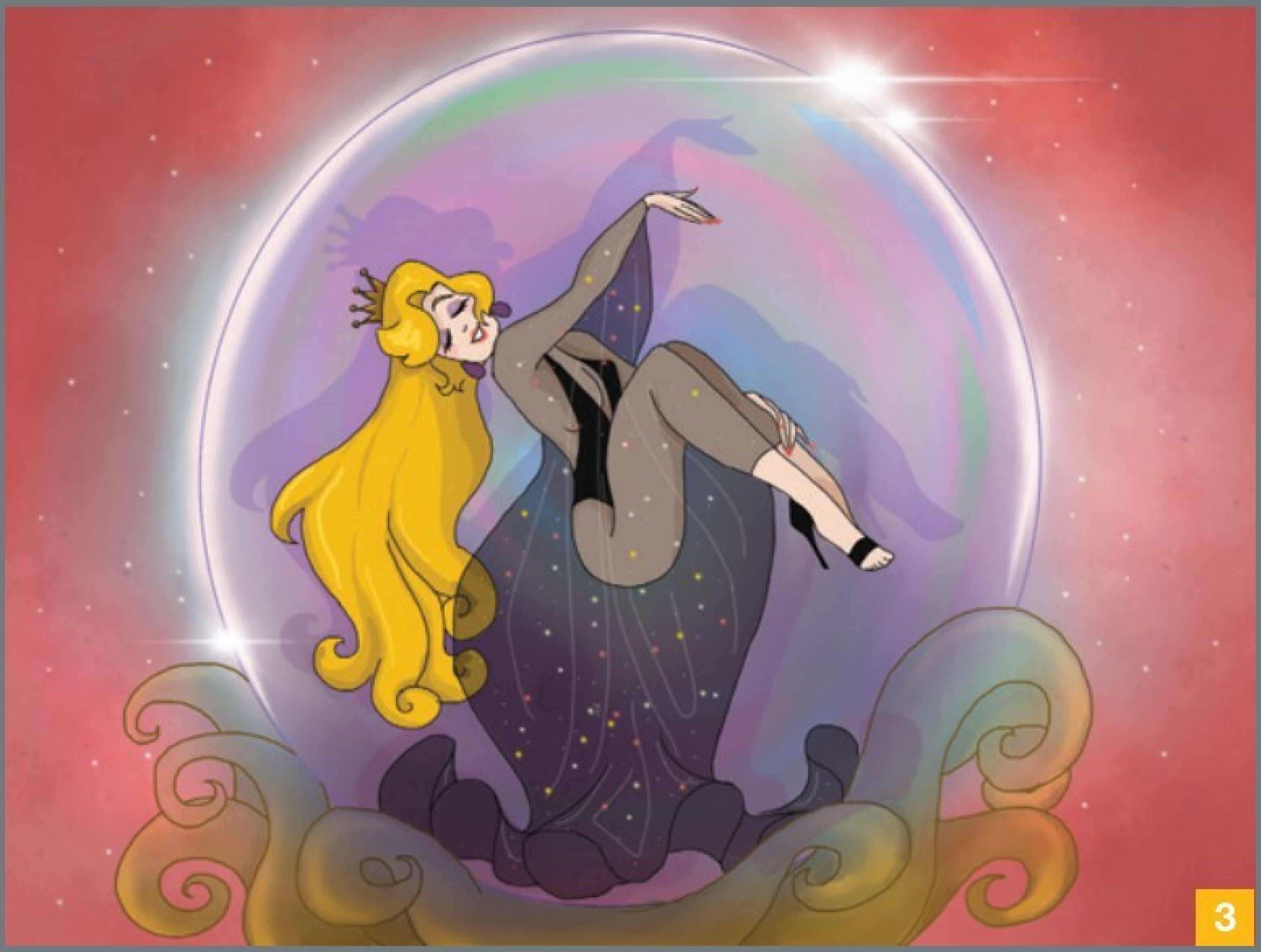
1 Rogelio Rendon
Praise the sun, these are some great-looking figurines!

2 Calley Casequin, Age 13
Jealous of Tom Nook's bellionaire status? Deal with it.

3 Aaliyah Pemberton
It's been a while since we thought about poor Daphne. Hopefully, Singe poked some holes in that bubble!

4 Chloey Casequin, Age 11
Only true fans will get this mash-up reference.

5 Sara Lynn
Bottoms up, Cloud! Enjoy the good times while they last …



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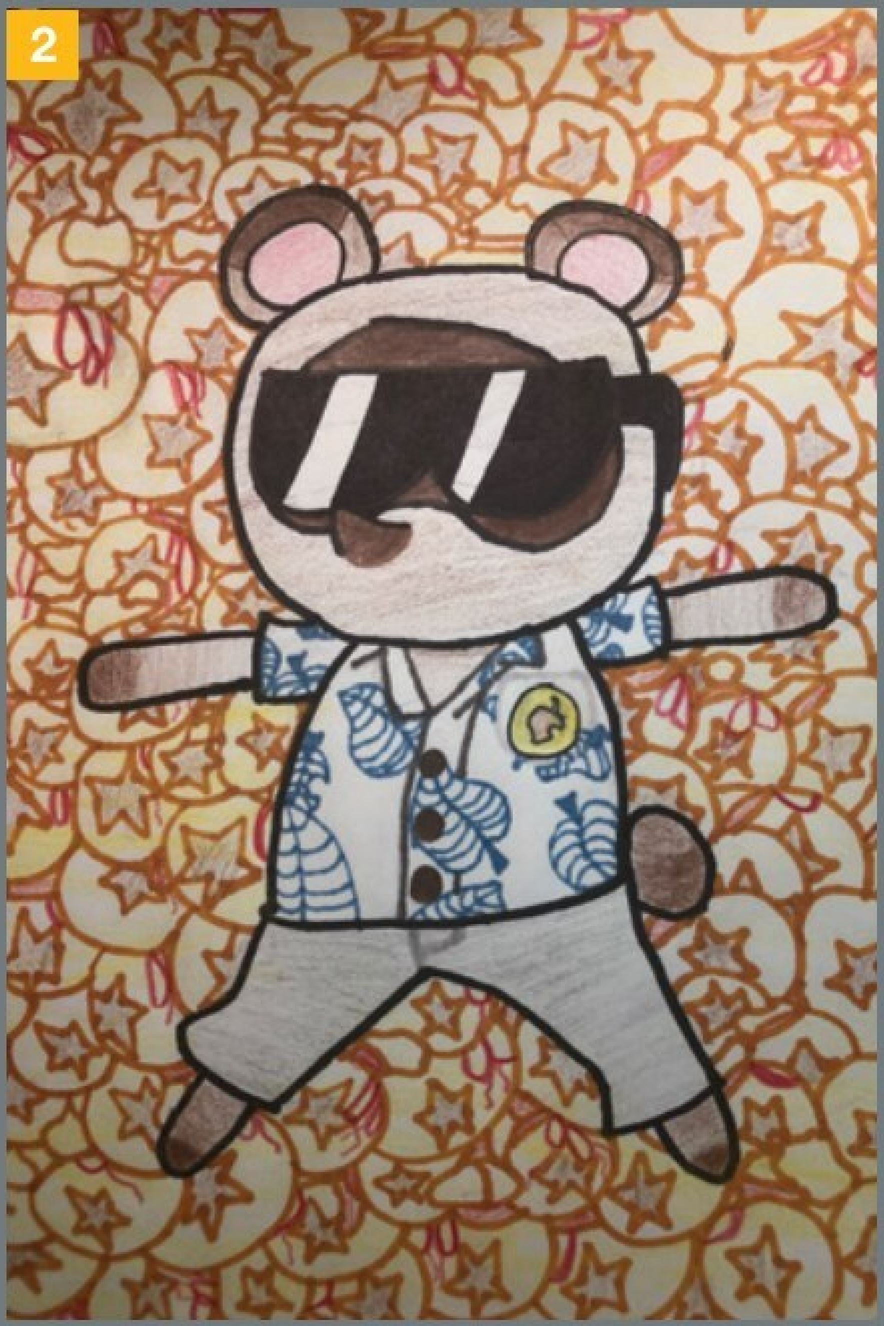

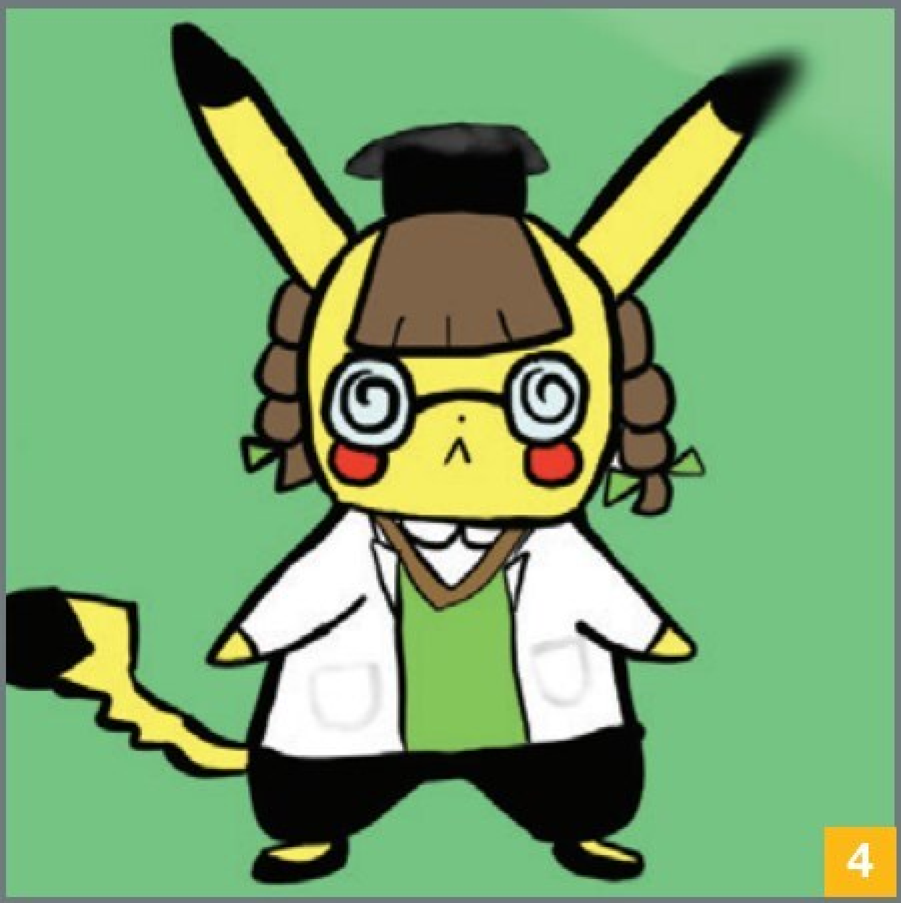

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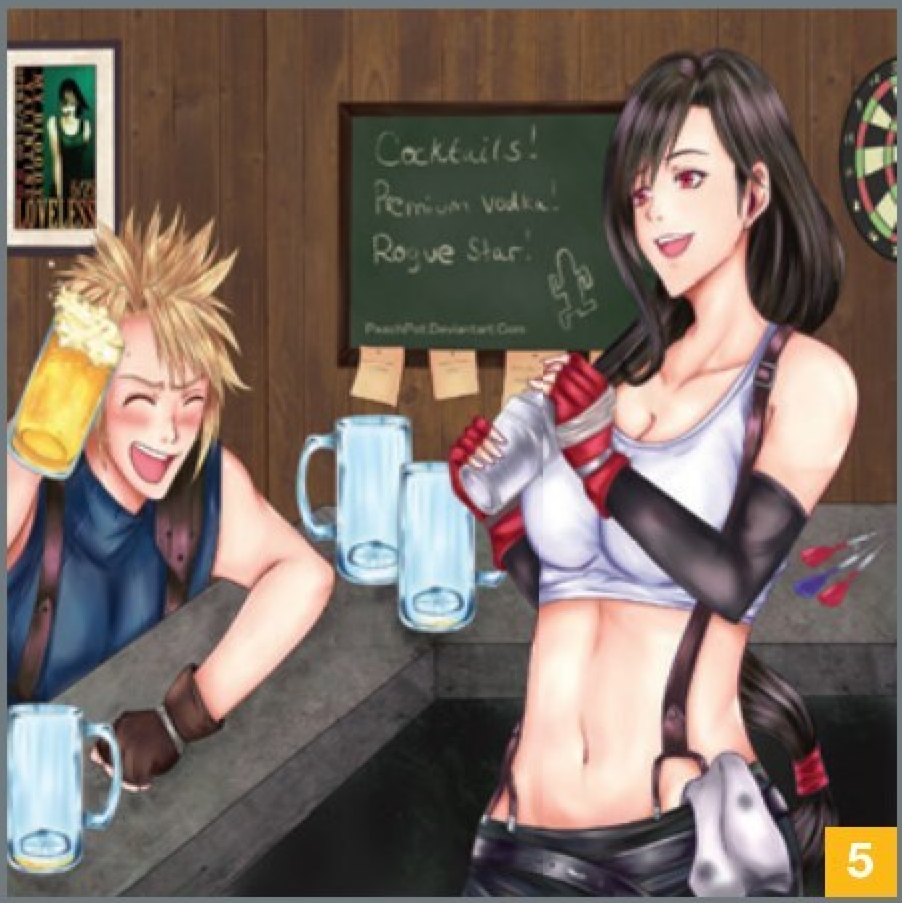
LOVELESS
Cocktails!
Premium Vodka!
Rogue Star!

5

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The DAWN of a NEW AGE

PlayStation and ***Xbox*** set the table for the next generation

In the gaming industry, the launch of new consoles is met with unparalleled excitement. New hardware means new possibilities, unlocking our imaginations as we envision what the future holds. As PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S rapidly approach, join us as we look at what you can expect when you power on your new systems for the first time.

by Brian Shea

A DOUBLE-BARRELED APPROACH

Both PlayStation and Xbox are opting to release two separate models of their hardware. While PlayStation 5's two models are essentially identical (minus the disc drive on the Digital Edition console), Xbox decided to launch two models with slightly different capabilities: Xbox Series X and Xbox Series S.

Xbox Series X is for those who want all the bells and whistles: It has 4K gaming, faster processing, more memory and storage, and, yes, a physical 4K Blu-ray disc drive. Xbox Series S, on the other hand, strips away the disc drive, loses some horsepower, RAM, and storage space, and maxes out at 1440p resolution.

Despite these downgrades, Microsoft still aims to deliver a next-gen experience with the Series S. It is less powerful than the bulkier (and more expensive) Series X, but it still plays all the same games. It also delivers lightning-quick loading thanks to the custom NVMe SSD, and it supports gameplay up to 120 frames per second.

Regardless of which model you choose, both PlayStation and Xbox are promising marked improvements in how you experience your games. While processing power and memory help with that, one key upgrade both companies have made across all their next-gen models could be the biggest improvement.

THE SOLID STATE OF THE UNION

Eye-popping graphics are often the focal point at the start of a new generation, but this time around, both PlayStation and Xbox are placing an unprecedented emphasis on speed. Fast start-ups and massively reduced load times are set to take center stage this generation thanks to solid-state drives.

The people involved in creating the new generation of PlayStation and Xbox hardware cannot speak highly enough about what these SSDs will do for the way we game. "PS5's ultra-high-speed SSD and integrated custom I/O system were developed with the goal of removing barriers to play – especially loading screens in games and the ability to fast travel in between locations of a game world," says PlayStation senior vice president of platform planning & management Hideaki Nishino. "The SSD truly is a game-changer that allows developers to create experiences that are only achievable on PS5."

The speed of the PlayStation 5 was on full display in the Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart demo shown in August. In the gameplay, the player was sent across dimensions instantly. In a 2019 demo on the power of the SSD, PlayStation showed vast improvements of the load times in Marvel's Spider-Man, cutting the time to fast travel from around 15 seconds to less than one second. Developers will be able to harness this speed with transformative potential.

The Xbox team is similarly enthusiastic about what the SSD can do for gaming's future. "As somebody who's been playing on these consoles for the last 6 to 12 months, it really has transformed how I play games," says Xbox director of program management Jason Ronald. "What's really exciting to me is thinking about where developers are going to go as we move forward. The first thing people recognize is how much faster everything loads; there are games where if your first experience with them is on a Series X or Series S, you may not even be aware that the load screens exist."

On top of greatly decreasing load times, the SSD allows for features like being able to quickly boot up the system, or Xbox's Quick Resume, which lets you suspend multiple games at the same time, then instantly jump between them. That way, if you're in the middle of a mission in Red Dead Redemption 2 when your friend wants to play a couple of Overwatch matches, you can jump between the games without delay.

However, the benefits of SSDs don't stop there. The faster, more efficient drives can allow developers to focus on creating more immersive worlds. "If you look at the explosion of massive open-world games, you're going to see a level of density and variety in a living world that you haven't seen before because the technology is no longer holding a game developer back," Ronald says. "They're not forced to funnel you through, say, an elevator or hallway. They're able to focus on the player and keep the player immersed."

Part of the immersion both PlayStation and Xbox bring up is in how your controller helps you feel connected to the world the developers drop you into. Coming off two of the best controllers ever, both companies are hoping to up the ante when it comes to their next-gen gamepads.

The Games

Of course, a console can look as good as it wants on your entertainment stand, and can deliver as much raw power as it wants, but if the games aren't there, what's the point? Here are the games you can expect to play on your next-gen PlayStation and Xbox at launch and beyond.

PLAYSTATION 5:

Week One:

- Assassin's Creed Valhalla
- Astro's Playroom (Pre-Installed)
- Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War
- Demon's Souls
- Destiny 2: Beyond Light
- Destruction AllStars
- Devil May Cry 5: Special Edition
- Dirt 5
- Fortnite
- Godfall
- Madden NFL 21
- Marvel's Avengers
- Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales
- NBA 2K21
- Observer: System Redux
- Sackboy: A Big Adventure
- Watch Dogs: Legion

Others To Look Forward To:

- Balan Wonderworld (March 26)
- Borderlands 3 (2020)
- Deathloop (2021)
- Dragon Age 4 (TBA)
- Far Cry 6 (February 26)
- Ghostwire: Tokyo (2021)
- Gran Turismo 7 (TBA)
- Grand Theft Auto V & GTA Online (2021)
- Hitman 3 (January 20)
- Horizon Forbidden West (2021)
- Immortals Fenyx Rising (December 3)
- Project Athia (TBA)
- Puyo Puyo Tetris 2 (December 4)
- Rainbow Six Siege (2020)
- Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart (2020)
- Resident Evil Village (2021)
- Returnal (2021)
- Scarlet Nexus (TBA)
- Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 (2021)

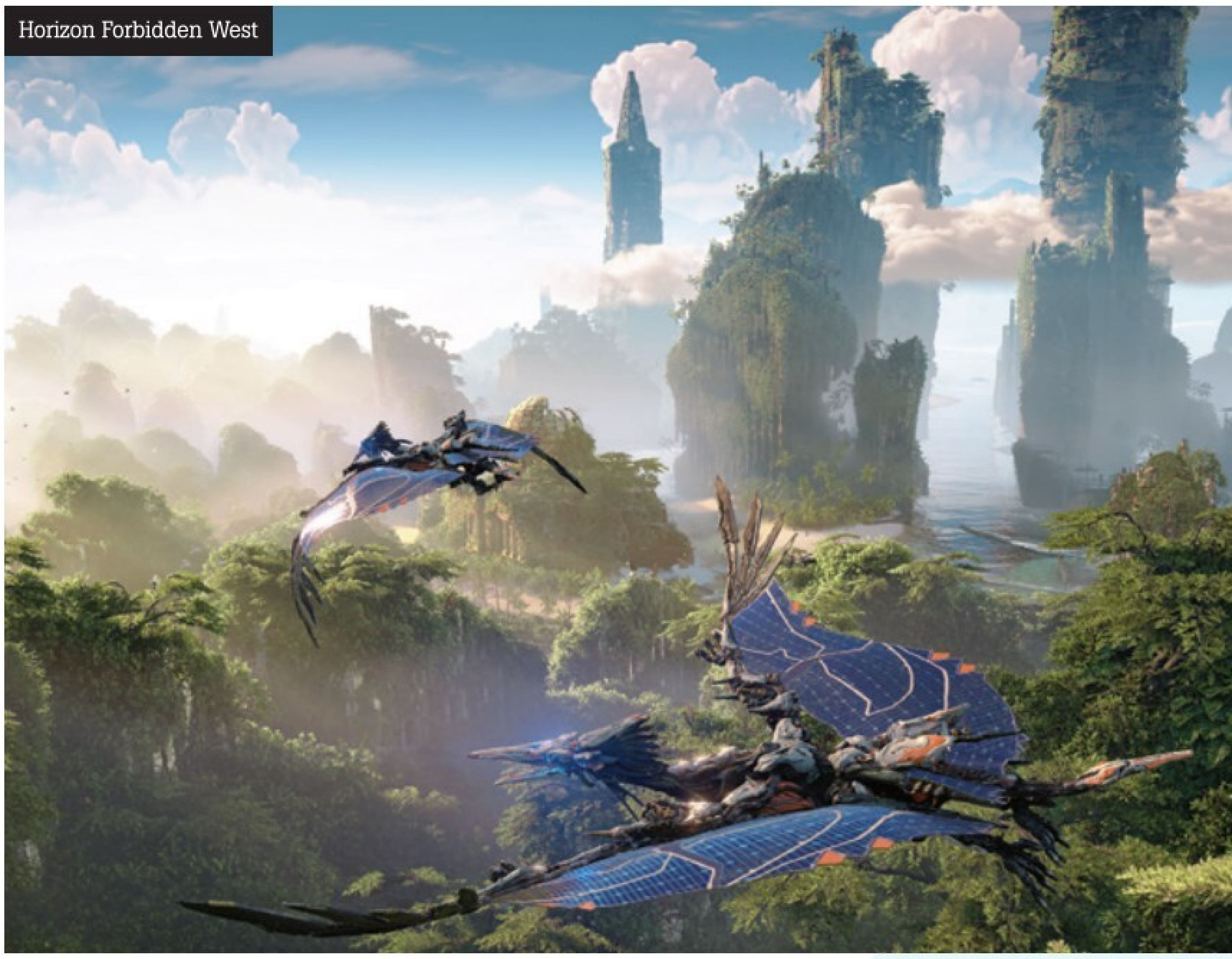
XBOX SERIES X/S:

Week One:

- Assassin's Creed Valhalla
- Bright Memory
- Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War
- Destiny 2: Beyond Light
- Devil May Cry 5: Special Edition
- Dirt 5
- The Falconeer
- Fortnite
- Forza Horizon 4
- Gears 5
- Gears Tactics
- Madden NFL 21
- Marvel's Avengers
- NBA 2K21
- Observer: System Redux
- Ori and the Will of the Wisps
- Sea of Thieves
- Tetris Effect: Connected
- Watch Dogs: Legion
- Yakuza: Like a Dragon

Others To Look Forward To:

- 12 Minutes (2020)
- Avowed (TBA)
- Balan Wonderworld (March 26)
- Borderlands 3 (2020)
- Bright Memory Infinite (TBA)
- Call of the Sea (2021)
- CrossfireX (2020)
- Dragon Age 4 (TBA)
- Everwild (TBA)
- Exo One (2020)
- Fable (TBA)
- Far Cry 6 (February 26)
- Forza Motorsport (TBA)
- Grand Theft Auto V & GTA Online (2021)
- Halo Infinite (2021)
- Hitman 3 (January 20)
- Immortals Fenyx Rising (December 3)
- The Medium (2020)
- Puyo Puyo Tetris 2 (December 4)
- Rainbow Six Siege (2020)
- Resident Evil Village (2021)
- Scarlet Nexus (TBA)
- Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2 (TBA)
- State of Decay 3 (TBA)
- Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines 2 (2021)


Horizon Forbidden West

THE POWER IN YOUR HANDS

During the current generation, both PlayStation and Xbox found sweet spots for their controllers. The PS4 and Xbox One gamepads are functional and comfortable. As the two companies push into the next generation, they are taking divergent approaches, with PlayStation making a big leap forward with its controller technology, while Xbox is improving upon its beloved controller in a more iterative manner.

With the DualSense controller, PlayStation wants to deliver a new sense of immersion to players. "Based on our discussions with game developers, we knew that the sense of touch within gameplay hasn't been a big focus for many games in past generations," Nishino says. "Our goal with the DualSense is to give gamers the feeling of being transported into the game world, and we want gamers to feel like the controller is an extension of themselves when they're playing. DualSense marks a radical departure from our previous controllers and captures just how strongly we feel about making a generational leap with PS5."

Thanks to dynamic vibrations, the DualSense can simulate the feeling of gun recoil and provide directional vibration to tell a player where an attack is coming from. In addition, the triggers can be tuned by developers to simulate pulling back on a bowstring or slamming on the brakes in a car with anti-lock brakes.

While the next-gen Xbox controller has undergone fewer changes when compared to its predecessor, it's hardly remaining stagnant. The Xbox One controller already offered haptic vibration like what the DualSense controller promises. A new hybrid d-pad and dedicated button for capturing screenshots and videos are the most obvious updates, but rounded bumpers and triggers plus improved grips make it more comfortable for a wider range of players.

BACKWARD FACING

The focus on the next generation of consoles is rightfully placed on games debuting in the near and distant future (see sidebar). Gamers everywhere are excited to dive into games like Horizon Forbidden West, the new God of War, Halo Infinite, and the next Fable. However, players don't want to completely abandon the libraries they've built over the last seven years.

Xbox's approach to backward compatibility was one of the biggest stories of the current generation, with hundreds of games from both Xbox 360 and the original Xbox made playable on Xbox One. Now, all those games, as well as the accessories (including your controllers) can move forward to Xbox Series X/S.

Not just that, but the next generation of Xbox consoles makes your older games better. The SSD reduces load times just like it does for games optimized for next-gen hardware, while improved CPU performance makes these games run at their peak resolution and more consistent framerates. Some games even benefit from a feature called Auto HDR, which adds high-dynamic range to games that were developed before HDR even existed. Top it all off with Smart Delivery, which gives you the best version of select games depending on which system you're playing on, and Xbox is the industry leader when it comes to backwards compatibility.

The Specs

Looking for the raw power and the nitty gritty of each console? Here's how PlayStation 5 and the Xbox Series X/S stack up to one another.

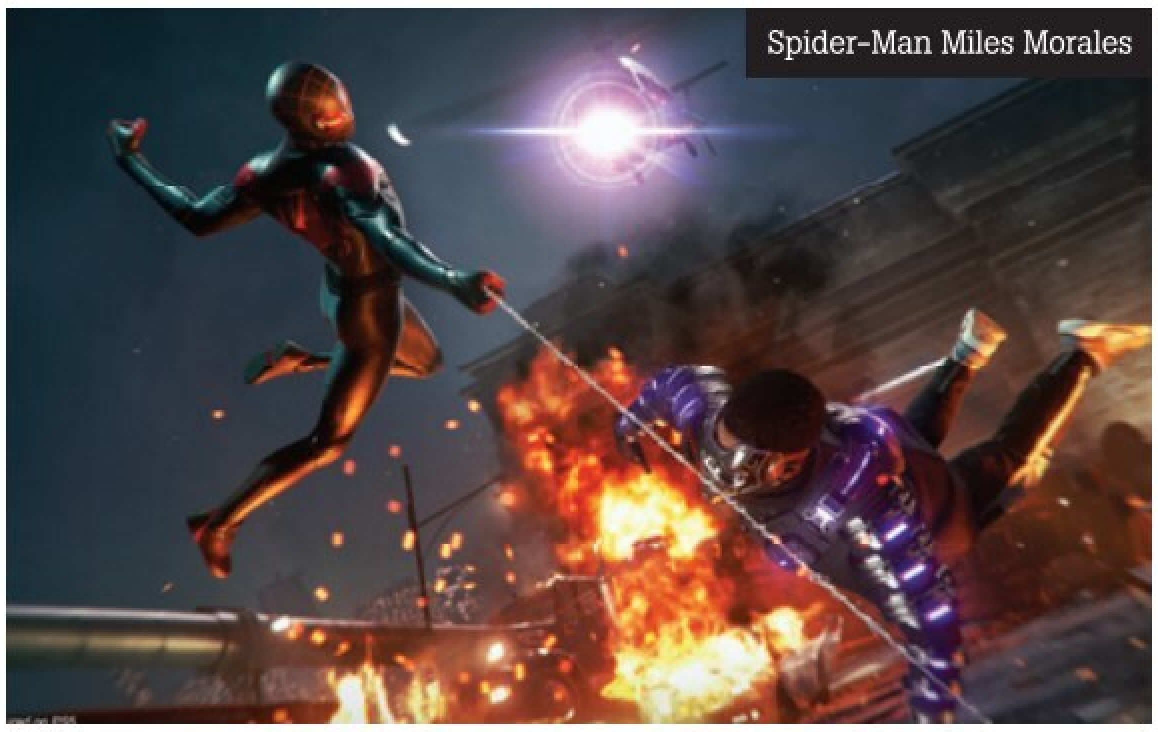
	PS5 Disc	**PS5 Digital**	**Xbox Series X**	**Xbox Series S**
Dimensions	*15.35" x 10.23" x 4.09"*	*15.35" x 10.23" x 3.62"*	*5.94" x 5.94" x 11.85"*	*10.8" x 5.9" x 2.5"*
Weight	*9.9 lbs*	*8.6 lbs*	*9.8 lbs*	*4.3 lbs*
Internal Storage	*825GB SSD*	*825GB SSD*	*1TB Custom NVME SSD*	*512GB Custom NVME SSD*
Expandable Storage	*USB HDD Support*	*USB HDD Support*	*Support for 1TB Seagate Expansion Card for Xbox Series X/S (matches internal storage exactly). Support for USB 3.1 external HDD*	*Support for 1TB Seagate Expansion Card for Xbox Series X/S (matches internal storage exactly). Support for USB 3.1 external HDD*
CPU	*8X Cores @ 3.5 GHz Custom AMD Zen 2*	*8X Cores @ 3.5 GHz Custom AMD Zen 2*	*8X Cores @ 3.8 GHz (3.66 GHz w/SMT) Custom Zen 2 CPU*	*8X Cores @ 3.6 GHz (3.4 GHz w/SMT) Custom Zen 2 CPU*
GPU	*10.28 TFLOPS, 36 CU @ 2.23 GHz Custom RDNA 2 GPU*	*10.28 TFLOPS, 36 CU @ 2.23 GHz Custom RDNA 2 GPU*	*12 TFLOPS, 52 CUs @ 1.825 GHz Custom RDNA 2 GPU*	*4 TFLOPS, 20 CUs @ 1.565 GHz*
Memory	*16GB GDDR6 256-bit*	*16GB GDDR6 256-bit*	*16GB GDDR6 320-bit*	*10GB GDDR6 128-bit*
Memory Bandwidth	*448 GB/s*	*448 GB/s*	*10GB @ 560 GB/s, 6GB @ 336 GB/s*	*8GB @ 224 GB/s, 2GB @ 56 GB/s*
Gaming Resolution	*4K*	*4K*	*4K*	*1440p*
High Dynamic Range	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Performance	*Up to 120 FPS*	*Up to 120 FPS*	*Up to 120 FPS*	*Up to 120 FPS*
Optical Drive	*4K UHD Blu-Ray*	*None*	*4K UHD Blu-Ray*	*None*
USB Ports	*1 Hi-speed USB Port, 2 Super-Speed USB Ports, 1 USB Type-C Port*	*1 Hi-speed USB Port, 2 Super-Speed USB Ports, 1 USB Type-C Port*	*3 USB 3.1 Gen 1 Ports*	*3 USB 3.1 Gen 1 Ports*
Price	*$499*	*$399*	*$499*	*$299*

Sony hasn't been as vocal or proactive on this topic, but if you're among those who want to bring forward your PlayStation 4 library, fear not: PlayStation representatives have said that 99 percent of PS4 games run on PS5. When players sign into their PSN account on their PS5, they'll automatically see their library of PS4 games in the menu. As for your DualShock 4 controller, PlayStation wants to capitalize on the technology of the new DualSense controller, so your PS4 controllers will only work with the PS5 on PS4 games.

From a services perspective, Xbox's focus on backward compatibility makes sense; Game Pass, which gives you access to more than a hundred games as part of a monthly subscription, has skyrocketed to be among the best values in video games, with the likes of Xbox Game Studios, Bethesda, and EA titles joining the already massive list of third-party publishers on the service. PlayStation also recently announced PlayStation Plus Collection, which gives PlayStation Plus subscribers access to several of PS4's best titles at no additional cost.

REASON TO CELEBRATE

When it comes to deciding which console to buy, think about what's most important to you. Do you want the biggest exclusive offerings? PlayStation 5 currently has the edge there. However, if you're looking for the best compatibility, bolstered by an unrivaled game-delivery service, one of the new Xbox consoles might be the one to grab. Whatever you're looking for, you have plenty of reasons to be excited for the next generation of consoles and the joy they will bring.


Spider-Man Miles Morales

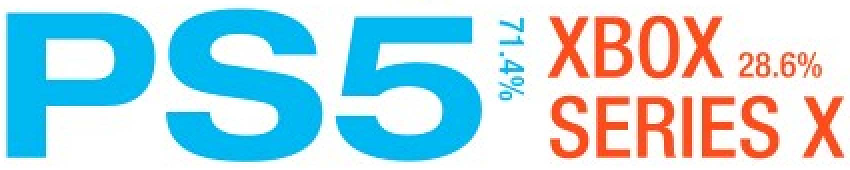
Resident Evil Village

POPULAR OPINION

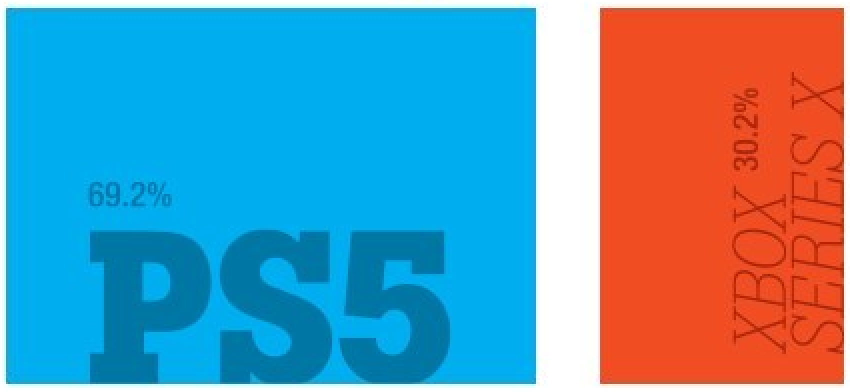
Your Take On The Next Generation

A new generation of hardware is almost here, and anticipation is running high. When you take a step back from the big showcase events, talking points, and trailers, the success of the upcoming systems depends on just one question: Will people buy them? To find that answer, we collected responses from *Game Informer*'s online readers regarding their expectations and intentions for next-gen consoles. Here's what they had to say. ***by Joe Juba***

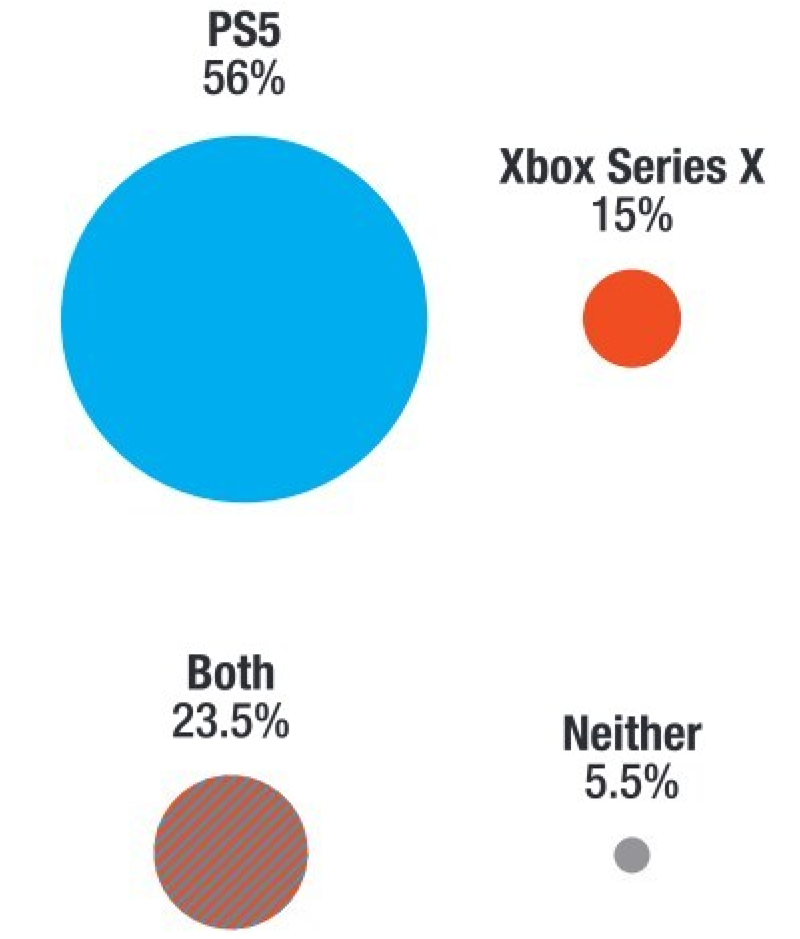
Which next-gen console are you most excited about?



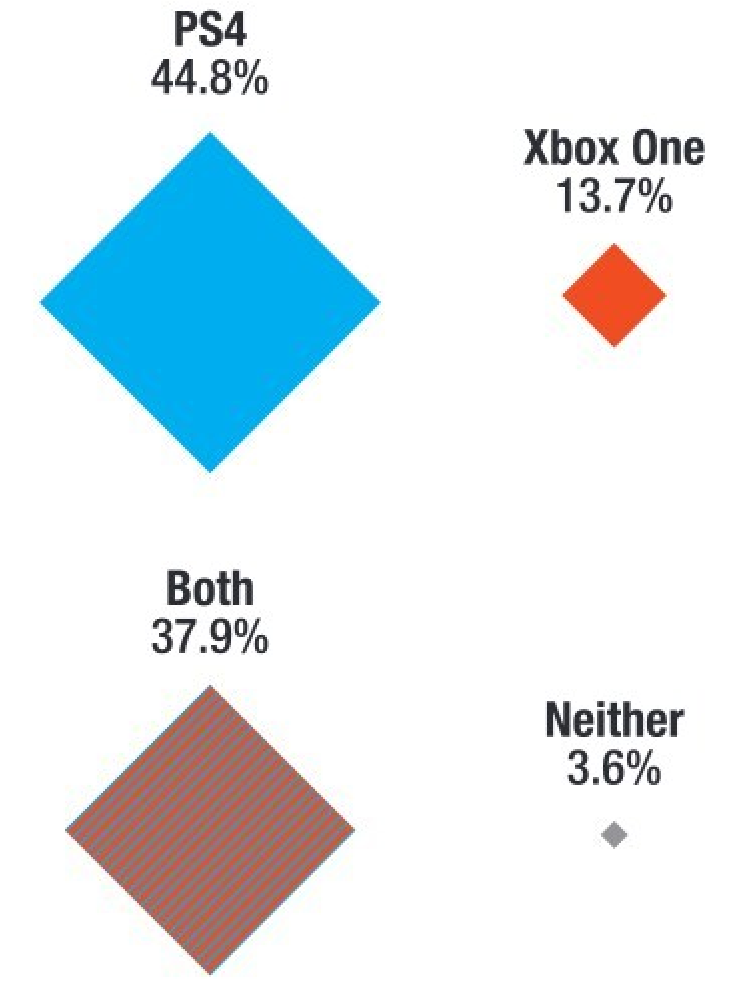
Which next-gen console has the coolest-looking design?



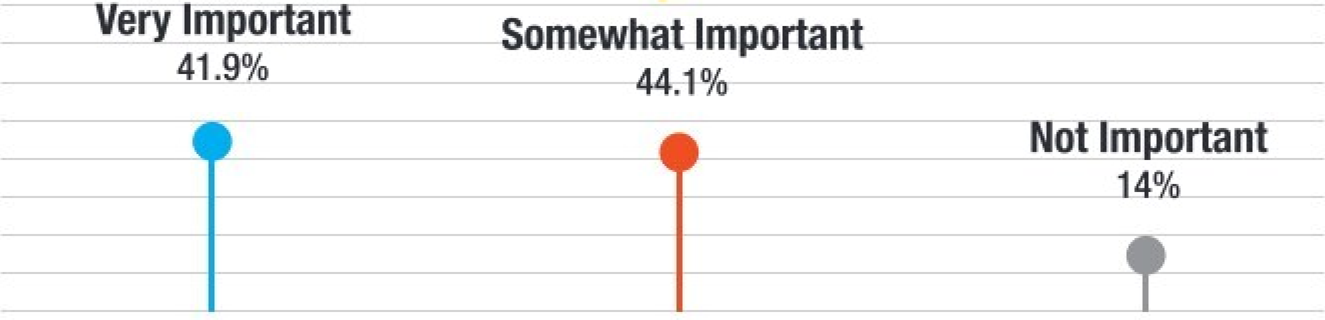
Which next-gen console(s) do you plan to purchase?



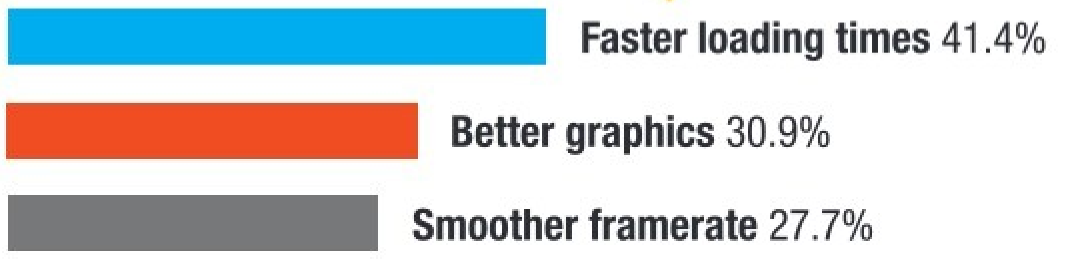
Which current-gen console(s) do you own?



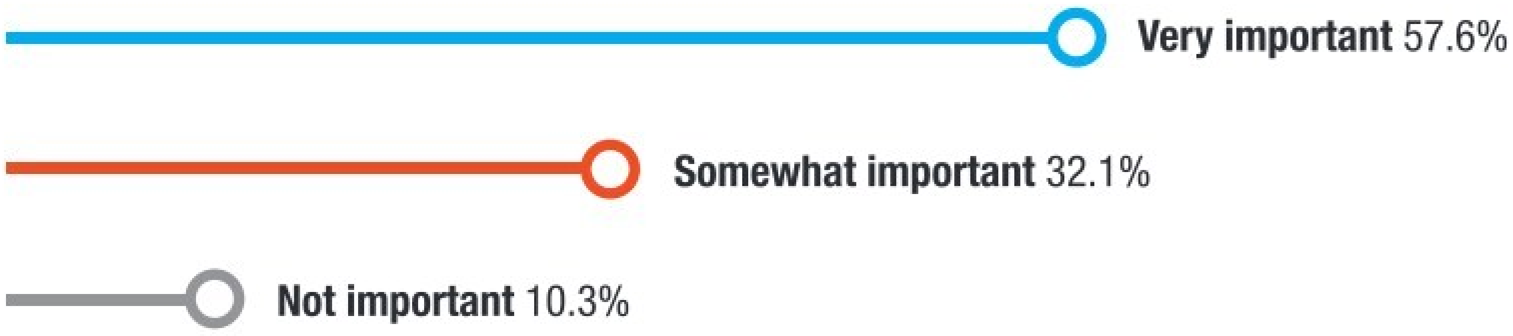
How important is backwards compatibility to you?



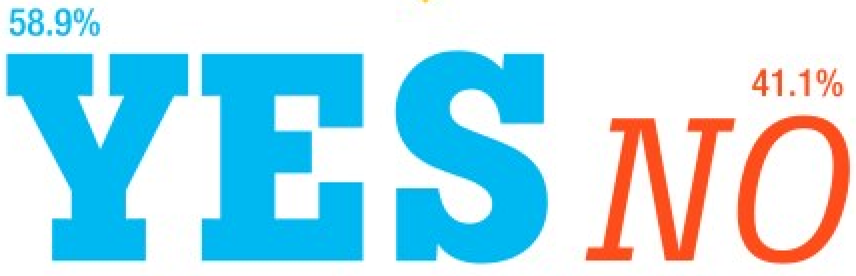
Which of the following technical features is most important to you?



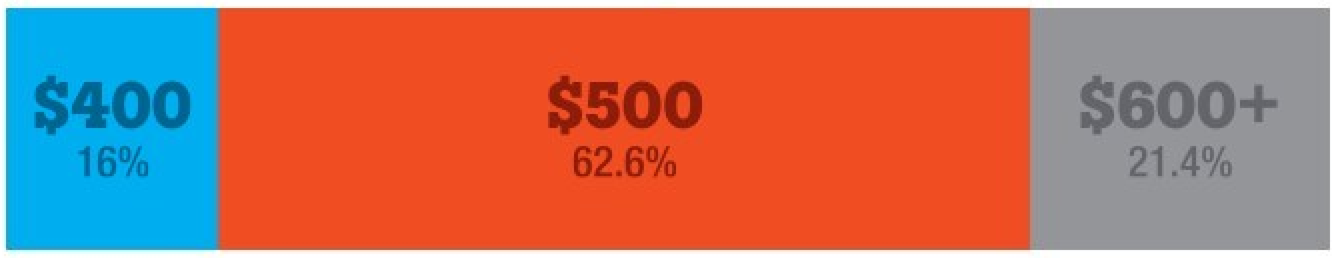
How important are console-exclusive games to you when deciding which system to buy?



If next-gen games had a price point of $70 each, would you be willing to pay that amount?

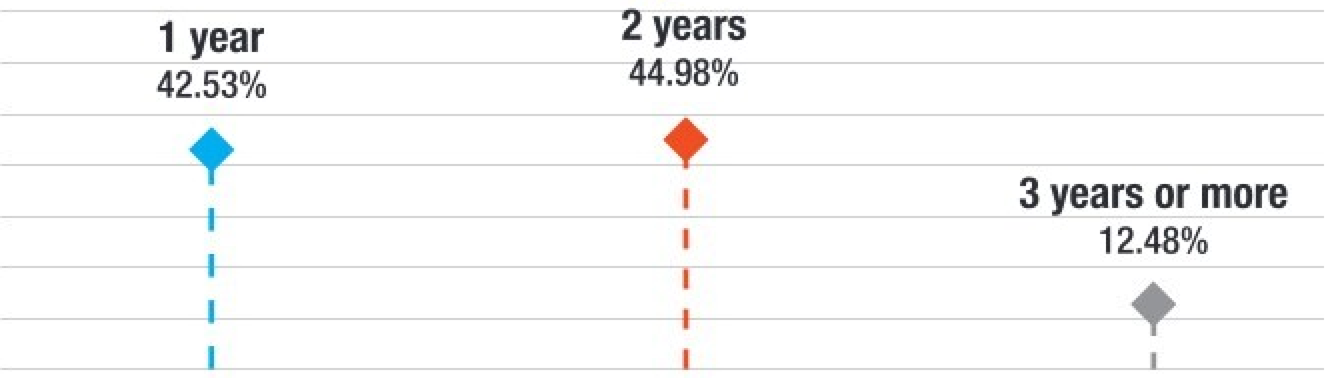


What is the most you will pay for a next-gen system?



Results based on 8,627 responses to a survey conducted on gameinformer.com. The survey was conducted prior to the announcement of next-gen price points and Xbox Series S.

After PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X release, how long do you expect games to continue coming out for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One?



WHAT WAS THE STORY OF THIS GENERATION?

As the **PlayStation 4** and **Xbox One** era winds down, it's clear that connectivity and convenience drove many of the changes we saw over the past seven years.

This console generation spanned seven years, but a momentous amount of change was packed into that time period. When it began, Microsoft expected us to talk to our consoles and use the Xbox One as an all-in-one entertainment console. Sony, on the other hand, envisioned a future where its Vita handheld would be an integral part of its remote-play ecosystem. It's easy to pick out the misses from those reveal events, but both companies were remarkably prescient about the future of gaming, too. Sony bet big on player sharing, devoting a button on the DualShock 4 to the then-unproven feature. And while some players squirmed at Microsoft's "always online" concept, the popularity of services like Game Pass and PlayStation Now show the concept of "owning" a game is more malleable than ever.

As we move into the next generation, we wanted to look back at the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One era one last time. What were some of the biggest innovations and changes that occurred? Did technological leaps enable game makers to explore ideas that couldn't have been implemented before? Or did numbers on a spec sheet matter less than shifting attitudes and consumer demands? To find the answers, I talked to more than a dozen developers and analysts to get their thoughts. The people I spoke to run the gamut from tiny one-person indie studios to the biggest publishers in the business, but common themes kept cropping up. Here is the story of this generation.

BY JEFF CORK

CONNECTIVITY IS KING

When a new console generation launches, we tend to focus on the numbers. Comparing processing power and RAM between the old tech and the shiny hardware on the horizon is a quick way to size things up. But, as appealing as it may be, spec sheets don't always tell the whole story.

"There were some things that excited the developers I'm surrounded with, and the GPU power of the current generation was really unexpected and really high end," says Daniel Lucic, marketing and communications manager at Croteam. "The amount of memory that the consoles provided as well. But it's more about the features that weren't necessarily hardware-based."

"There were some extremely impressive technical things happening with current-gen systems," says Ben Wiley, program director for game-production management at Champlain College. "The fact that Xbox One or PS4 can do native 4K with games like Red Dead Redemption 2 or Forza or Devil May Cry with HDR lighting, that's really impressive. But to me, that's not the story. Games will always look better and run faster because that's just the nature of hardware. I think the story is the theme of connection, of bringing things together."

This generation didn't introduce online connectivity to the console market. But online reached a level of maturity over the past generation that fundamentally changed everything, including how we access games, how we play them, and even (or especially) how they're made. It's impossible to overstate just how critical that shift has been over the past seven years.

"I think connectivity has meant everything to the business, and it's why we're seeing the growth we have in the industry and why the games that are being made now are being made," says Mat Piscatella, executive director of the Games group at market-research firm NPD. "It's all about going from an isolated console under a TV in the living room to where we are today; it's such a remarkable change, and it's probably the biggest generational leap within a generation that we've ever seen."

HOW GAMES ARE SOLD

Piscatella says that during the PS3/Xbox 360 generation, digital distribution accounted for about 2 percent of sales. Now, companies including Sony, EA, and Take-Two have revealed more than half of the games they sell are purchased digitally.

"If I had to go out and buy a game like Fall Guys or Spiritfarer or whatever, there's just enough friction involved in that transaction, where it's like: Do I really want to drive to the store?" says Jared Neuss, director of production at Riot Games. "I have to find a parking spot, and then I should probably get groceries – it turns into this whole big ordeal. Whereas if I can just drop 15 bucks on it and go downstairs and have dinner and then come back and be ready to play it with very little effort, it's the perfect scenario for me."

Convenience seems to be tantamount to the digital purchasing shift, in addition to factors including better broadband access and better surfacing of online marketplaces. "If someone would have told me seven or eight years ago that I would be downloading a 50 GB game, I'd say they're crazy," Lucic says. "I'm sure there's a lot of impulse buying. If you'd need to go to the store and buy it, I don't think many people would do that."

Connectivity has enabled different models for publishers to get their games into the marketplace, too. People are, indeed, buying more games digitally than ever before. But that's not the only way that we are able to play. Over the past generation, we've seen the rise of subscription services, including Xbox Game Pass and PlayStation Now. These services charge customers a monthly fee and give players access to a rotating library of games.

"Subscription spending across all categories of media continues to go higher, and people are subscribing to more services – so many that people even forget all the services they're subscribing to," Piscatella says. "I know the concept of ownership has changed a little bit. Back in the day, the big pushback at the Xbox One reveal was, 'What do you mean, I don't own my games and I can't sell my used games?' It's just different now."

"My consoles behave exactly like that pitch at the beginning of the generation today, right now, and I have no complaints," says Sean Crooks, lead producer of Watch Dogs: Legion. "I think it's a control thing, where people understanding and thinking that they have that control is important to players."

"The only thing I have boxes for are the games that I've worked on, and that's more of a memento of the time that I'd spent," Neuss says. "I got rid of my comic books, and it's all Comixology for me. I care about the experience more than the trophy on the wall; I don't need my big elephant head or whatever to show you that I did a thing. Giving people the opportunity to try a thing, have that experience, but care just about the experience and move on is so much easier with stuff like Game Pass and other subscription services."

That shift has been met with skepticism from some developers, who are unsure how subscription models will factor into things like lifetime sales. After all, a game's performance in the market affects everything from employee bonuses to the budgets of future projects.

"You can look at it from a consumer level and you can look at it from a developer level," says Phi Dinh of Phigames, a micro studio working on Recompile. "Some people are saying we're moving into Spotify territory and it's really bad for developers because it's like a race to the bottom – especially if games are ranked in terms of play time. That's really going to be a detriment to short games. I understand that kind of viewpoint, but I don't think Game Pass and similar systems now are following that model. I think it's closer to maybe a Netflix model, where games are almost funded up front."

"I think the subscription models are really cool; it's great as a consumer to be able to pay 10 or 20 dollars and be able to play a lot of big games, but I'm not sure how it changes when you have subscription models on some of your games or you've got free-to-play games," says Scott Phillips, lead director on Immortals Fenyx Rising. "Honestly, I put my focus on 'I try to make great games,' and that's it."

CHANGING THE GAME

Connectivity hasn't just allowed companies more ways to distribute their games. Thanks in part to the larger hard drives that this past generation provided, consoles are moving more toward a PC-style model, where games can receive more than traditional post-launch support. By that, we're not talking about the DLC expansions or content refreshes that were prevalent even in the PS3/Xbox 360 era.

One of the most obvious and successful examples is Epic Games' Fortnite. Its original PvE component, Save the World, may not have been the smash that the developers had hoped for. But current-gen hardware allowed the team to react to the burgeoning success of the still-new battle-royale genre. Its free-to-play battle royale soon became the most popular game on the planet – a pivot that would have been unimaginable a decade ago.

"But it's not just Fortnite, it's also games like Rainbow Six Siege, it's No Man's Sky, it's Sea of Thieves – these games that have come out to very lukewarm or even poor receptions but have been able to evolve over time. Because of that connectivity they're able to continually service the game," Piscatella says. "For people who bought those games, that's great, because they get a much better product over time, even though it may have been disappointing at launch."

"Destiny 2 is exactly that kind of a situation, where we launched it and reviews were generally pretty good," Neuss says. "Then, very shortly after it moved into live-service mode, players were like, 'Well what do I do now?' There was definitely that sort of panic moment, where it's like, 'Ooh.' That smooth transition from a big, bombastic launch to, 'I'm playing this game for the next seven years of my life,' wasn't really there, so the team really had to work to make that happen. You've seen that multiple times in this generation."

"Ultimately, once you make the game and it goes in the wild, it belongs to the fans," Crooks says. "It does. Now they make it what it is, and their participation in it – or nonparticipation in it – impacts what we do with it. It's an internal saying: It's their game now, so we have to make sure we respect it and understand what they want because they're not wrong. We saw that in the dedicated servers for For Honor, which took a while and was a big technological investment, but the team did it. It's that kind of stuff that we have to be proactive to and we have to listen to, because at that point when it goes live it's their game."

Live-service games have become an increasingly common element of this generation, but Sony and Microsoft have given developers tools that extend beyond major updates. "We worked a lot with first parties to allow more – not just live updates, but server-side controls to our titles," Crooks says. "A lot of our games evolved to allow us to deliver content and modify content balance and give a better experience for players simply because we could change a difficulty value on a web server that would affect anyone connected online that we necessarily didn't do in the previous console-generation cycles."

Connectivity has allowed developers to make changes to their games before players even have a chance to buy them. Before this generation, players rarely had a chance to play a game before its release. Now, console players can routinely check out works in progress via early access and beta releases. To be fair, that's something PC players have been doing for decades, but it's a fairly recent arrival on console. That kind of prerelease testing has proven to be invaluable to developers.

"There are often differences between the actual devkit that the dev team is using and the actual retail kits that fans have in their living room, so getting to do some of those beta opportunities where you get to have a beta of your game that launches on console is really good information for a developer," says Jon Carr, technical director at Tripwire. "We actually then get some feedback on how is it running on not this huge well-ventilated devkit, but how is it running on that device that they've probably stuffed in a bookshelf and it's closed off on both sides and what's happening with it."

"It's great for us as developers, because we can figure out where the issues are testing it with real players at scale," says Paul Croft, co-founder and chief games officer at Mediatonic. "It's a really valuable tool for us that we definitely made good use of for Fall Guys."

SHARING ENTERS THE PICTURE

Last generation, if you wanted to share a triumphant gaming moment or point out a particularly funny glitch, your options were limited. If you were on the forefront of gameplay capturing, you may have been lucky enough to have been recording your session during that particular moment. Or you could snap a quick photo of your screen using your phone. Most likely, you'd just remember the moment and tell your friends about it the next time you talked. This generation shifted that mindest.

In retrospect, it seems obvious: People want to capture and share those moments. But it's easy to forget how much of a gamble that Sony and Microsoft were taking by baking that functionality into their consoles. Imagine how silly the "share" button would have looked on the DualShock 4 controller had that interaction flopped with players. That wasn't the case. In a few short years, snapping a screenshot on your Switch or capturing a few minutes of gameplay after a frantic Bloodborne battle has become almost second nature for a lot of players.

"It's not just sharing, right? I think it's bigger than that," says Dominic Butler, projects director, editorial technology, at Ubisoft. "You call it what you want, but I call it player authorship. The idea that the player is somehow creating by playing. Before, you would just consume the product. I have the disc, I put the disc in, and I play the game. It's the same for everyone. Now, because I'm able to kind of play in certain ways and I'm able to stress certain situations, I'm able to customize, I'm able to inform the game, either through gameplay or other direct means, it allows players to really make them feel like the game is an extension of them."

Butler says he saw the impact of sharing after seeing a viral clip of a ship-related bug in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag. "'Wait, this has changed everything,'" he recalls thinking. "We really thought all it was going to be used for was to troll developers. 'We captured all your bugs and we saw all your stuff and it's here for posterity even when you fix it.' But in fact, it's not the case. It's just snowballed and snowballed and we're seeing an even greater impact and new ways to share."

"Not every game idea lends itself well to that," Croft says. "If you're making a narrative-driven game, sometimes it's better to play those experiences than to watch them. But in Fall Guys' case, the idea itself being based on TV game shows in the first place lent itself naturally to being watched, and I think that's been a very integral part to the success of it, really."

Social media has grown into a way for players to share GIFs of their gaming antics, but developers and publishers have also found it to be an effective way to reach out to their fans. It's more of a mindset shift than something related to the console hardware per se, but many of the walls between players and creators have come down this generation.

"It's changed the way that we've talked to consumers," says Steve Filby, Motion Twin head of marketing and cofounder of Evil Empire. "It's changed the way we reach out to people. I think that's something. The rise of community building. Getting out and talking about your game early to people; 'You all like these games over here, we're making this thing, we're inspired by these games, and we also want to do this. What do you think?'"

SONY
PS4
SHARE
OPTIONS

OKAY, THE TECH WAS PRETTY COOL

We may have downplayed the importance of the console hardware this generation, but we have to give credit where credit is due. The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One both brought a lot of power into players' hands. That resulted in additional graphical fidelity, and the ability for teams to more closely realize their initial creative visions.

"My job changes from conception to production to shipping the game," says Raphael Lacoste, brand art director for the Assassin's Creed franchise. "When I start, I'm just a concept artist and doing a lot of illustration myself, and I'm a lead concept artist as well. As soon as we go in 3D in the engine, I'm working a lot with the technical directors and with the level artists to make sure we can bring to life this visual direction that was first a 2D concept. Now we're getting very close to what we had in mind in the beginning, so it's very encouraging."

Open-world games really came into their own this generation, with the increased console power enabling developers to better model cities and populations. "You could do those last generation, there were some games that had some pretty compelling stuff like that, but this generation you could have a crowded street scene with more people that were more varied and they didn't all look sort of the same because you had to reuse five different heads across 100 people," says Nathan Mefford, senior graphics programmer at Iron Galaxy. "They can each be doing different kinds of individual behaviors, they can react to the player character in more interesting ways. Even the games that managed to do those sorts of crowded cityscapes, you just didn't have the ability to do that last generation."

"I think this generation was something where creating a real world with simulation and people and economies that live on their own was something that Ubisoft has tried really hard to realize these worlds as ever more real places that exist on their own," Phillips says.

About halfway through the generation's lifespan, we saw something unusual: Sony and Microsoft released new versions of their hardware which, in part, supported the then-new 4K displays and HDR lighting. We've seen mid-generational console refreshes before, but they've traditionally focused on decreasing the price and form factor. This was different.

"As a developer, that was really exciting, honestly," Mefford says. "I'm glad that they did that, because there were things that we wanted to explore as developers that were enabled by this kind of leap in power that we got in the middle of the generation. Of course, you always do have to support the base versions of the console, so that put some constraints on it, but as a developer that was very exciting to have some extra power to play with as a surprise halfway through the console generation."

Looking at this generation as a whole, it's remarkable what stuck and what didn't. Motion gaming is over, as is the frenzy over gaming on Facebook (the company has pivoted to streaming). We saw the near-ubiquity of Twitch personalities, pro gaming, and battle passes. Many of these seeds were planted last generation, and finally bore fruit in recent years. There's no telling what's ahead, aside from knowing that players will likely have more choices than ever.

Neuss sums it up best: "I look at this generation, and I feel like we got to a place where developers have a much bigger opportunity to have a broad reach, even for smaller games, consoles have figured out that players just want to play games and have easy access to them – it all feels like it's moving in a direction that's just super positive for the players, which is super encouraging." ◆

With Gary Whitta
Animal Talking

Making Animal Talking

How Gary Whitta created a virtual talk-show sensation

by Kimberley Wallace

It started simple and pure. Screenwriter Gary Whitta, previously editor-in-chief of *PC Gamer* and best known for his screenwriting work on *The Book of Eli* and *Rogue One*, was just having fun showing off his Animal Crossing: New Horizons island to his Twitch followers, when he pondered out loud about what to do with his villager's basement in the game. Originally, he had made it a game room with pinball machines and a foosball table, but he was ready for a change of scenery and scrapped everything. Standing in an empty space, fans watched as a lightbulb went off in Whitta's mind. "At one point, all that was in there was a desk and a couch. And I just thought, "Oh, you could almost make this look like a late-night talk set," Whitta recalls. He couldn't have predicted what would come next.

The enthusiasm was infectious. Whitta replicated the look and feel of late-night American talk shows, with the standard couch, desk, and musical area we've seen accompany greats such as Johnny Carson, David Letterman, and Jay Leno, and his viewers wanted to share in the endeavor. "One of the nice things about playing games on stream is that your community wants to help you out," Whitta says. "We got crowdsourced a lot of the items and had a version of the set on day one. If you go back and look, it's honestly not that terribly different from what we have today. We've refined it and kind of moved things around a little bit, but it basically looks the same."

Once he had the set complete, Whitta decided to have fun with it. Why not invite a friend and play the part of the host and guest? After actress and personality Naomi Kyle joined for the first test run, Whitta saw the magic. The pair really got into it, joking around about different talk-show tropes and portraying them with their virtual Animal Crossing characters. Whitta knew he had to keep the fun going. "The object was never to get like big celebrity guests or anything," Whitta says. "It was just a way to hang out with our friends in a way that was fun. Everyone's miserable. Everyone's stuck at home [due to COVID-19]. What can we do that's goofy and different and might put a smile on our faces and maybe the faces of the people that are watching?" It didn't take long to catch on, because by the fourth episode, Twitch took notice and put it on the front page, scoring Whitta tons of new viewers.

Animal Talking quickly went viral. Over 20 episodes later, Whitta laughs as he calls the whole success an accident. "If you set out to make something viral, you'll always fail," he says. "I think true virality and the things that really pop off are the things that just happen genuinely by accident, then you kind of stumble into them. And we stumbled into this." Whitta thinks that having a familiar and comfortable setting like the late-night talk show, a cultural cornerstone which has been around since the '50s, and putting a spin on it is what has driven audiences to his show.

The difference in scenery has also caught the attention of various celebrities, and *Animal Talking* show has already featured a slew of top-tier talent, from Elijah Wood to Selena Gomez. "Brie Larson was terrific; if you go back and watch her interview, she can barely get through parts of it because she's so tickled she's on a show inside Animal Crossing," he recalls. "She just thinks it's so hilarious, like she's constantly cracking herself up. And that's the appeal of it, that celebrities don't look at this like another promotional box."

Part of the fun is seeing the surprise of who will be on each week. "We've never had a bad guest," Whitta says. Even Microsoft head Phil Spencer stopped by. "I think Phil just recognized that it was a cool thing to do," Whitta says. "And whatever rivalry exists between Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft, he didn't see that as a barrier for him appearing on the show." One of Whitta's favorite guests so far has been rapper T-Pain. "The entire T-Pain episode was just this incredible train wreck, like in the most glorious way possible, because you can't control him. He just brings so much energy to the show."

Animal Crossing: New Horizons wasn't exactly built to host talk shows, and Whitta has learned a few lessons a long way. Guests now have to do a pre-interview, where they come to his island for a soundcheck. "No one's sound setup works great the first time, you always have to spend 20 minutes troubleshooting it." Whitta says a few times while live people ran out of battery or got so engaged in the conversation they forgot to touch their Switch and auto-sleep kicked in (that setting is now required to be off). Then Nintendo started doing regularly scheduled server maintenance on the game during Wednesday nights, so Whitta had to move it off that day. "It takes me probably between 10 to 15 hours to prep a show, and this isn't my job," Whitta says. "It's just a hobby that has now grown out of control. It's taking up too much of my time."

Whitta recently announced *Animal Talking* is on hiatus. In its place, he started a show called *Talk Guys*, where he interviews various people in the video game and entertainment industry while they play Fall Guys. It's much less production work and time commitment. This doesn't mean Whitta is done with *Animal Talking*; he already has ideas of how he wants to evolve it going forward – he just needs time to figure out how to get there. In the meantime, he does have some plans in place for the beloved show. "*Animal Talking* is going to do a Halloween special, a Thanksgiving special, and a Christmas special," he shares. "We're already working on those, so there will definitely be three super-sized episodes of *Animal Talking* before the end of the year. We may do a few others again when guests compel us to do so. And then next year, in 2021, I think you're going to see something really interesting happen that I can't talk about yet." Color us intrigued; just like his show, Whitta is full of surprises.

OCULUS QUEST 2

THE FUTURE OF VR

by Ben Reeves

When the original Quest released in the middle of 2019, it seemed like a smart move for VR. Oculus' portable headset wasn't as powerful as headsets like the Rift, but it also didn't need to remain tethered to a PC. The Quest gave you the freedom to play games anywhere you had room to move around, and its lack of cords was surprisingly freeing. Better still, some of VR's best experiences – Beat Saber, Pistol Whip, Job Simulator – prove that you don't need a lot of horsepower to have a good time. As a result, sales of the Oculus Quest quickly outpaced all of Oculus' other offerings.

It's been nearly 18 months since the release of the first Quest and Oculus is ready to drop a hardware refresh that improves the headset in nearly every way. Sure, putting on the Quest 2 wasn't as big a revelation as the first time I wore a headset without cords, but Oculus' newest portable VR headset has me more excited for the future of VR than I've been in a long time.

As expected, the Quest 2 is more powerful than its first iteration. Under the hood is a Qualcomm Snapdragon XR2 Platform, which is an incredibly powerful mobile chipset. This won't run circles around your PC gaming rig, but games like Superhot VR, Ghost Giant, and Phantom: Covert Ops look super smooth on the new headset and run without a hitch. The other reason that games look better on the Quest 2 is its new display panel. This fast-switch LCD offers a resolution of 1,832x1,920 per eye, which is 50 percent more pixels than the original Quest. These new displays greatly reduce the graininess I usually notice from VR headsets, but I'd still prefer a wider field of view than what is on offer here. Like most modern headsets, the Quest 2 reduces your peripheral vision, so I still occasionally felt like I was peering through a periscope.

The Quest 2 is a bit more comfortable. Not only is the device 10 percent lighter than the previous model, but I had less trouble finding a comfortable fit thanks to the Quest 2's redesigned face mask. This level of comfort extends to the new Touch controllers, which are slightly more ergonomic and now feature dedicated thumb rests. I often forgot I was even holding a controller while using these Touch controllers.

However, you can ditch the controllers for some experiences, because Oculus' experimental hand-tracking feature will soon come out of beta. Using simple hand gestures, you can navigate system menus and other dedicated applications, which is novel, but the feature is extra sensitive to small hand movements, and I ultimately found it easier to navigate menus using a controller.

I don't have many negative things to say about the Quest 2, but I'd love to see a more robust battery in future iterations. I squeezed a little over 2 hours of playtime out of the Quest 2 before needing to plug it back in, which is comparable to the original, but I still felt cut short during some game sessions.

From a tech standpoint, the Oculus Quest 2 is a great step forward for VR, and I'd love to see more games take advantage of that new tech. Thankfully, any title that previously released for the original Quest will work seamlessly the Quest 2, so any game you already own will migrate over the new headset without a problem. At the same time, there aren't any applications that run exclusively on the Quest 2, meaning there aren't any games that make special use of the Quest 2's speedier processors. While the Quest 2 is undoubtedly a powerful portable VR headset, you'll still need to plug it into a PC using an Oculus Link cable to play more demanding titles like Stormlands, Half-Life: Alyx, or Respawn's upcoming Medal of Honor: Above and Beyond.

If you're in the market for a VR headset, the Quest 2 would be a smart choice. The device is sleek and it offers some of the cleanest visuals of any headset on the market. Sadly, there aren't a lot of new games that take advantage of the Quest 2's more powerful hardware, but this system makes every game already inside the Quest portfolio look better than ever. The virtual-reality market continues to grow but hasn't exploded as fast as some of us had hoped. I wouldn't be surprised if that started to change with the release of the Quest 2 on October 13.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$299 (64GB), $399 (256GB) | oculus.com

GAME INFORMER'S

HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE 2020

BY BEN REEVES & MATT MILLER

THE HOLIDAY SEASON IS UPON US, and so begins the time-honored tradition of hinting to your friends, family, and partners about the gifts you'd like to receive. We're here to help, with a curated list of some of our favorite stuff from across the worlds of toys, collectibles, tech, tabletop games, active gear, and home decor. Feel free to casually leave this article sitting open on the table, with certain picks enthusiastically circled. Good luck!

TOYS & COLLECTIBLES

1

2

great for kids

3

editors' choice:

LEGO NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

RELIVE THE GLORY DAYS WITH THIS GORGEOUS BUILDING-BLOCK HOMAGE TO THE SYSTEM THAT STARTED IT ALL. ENJOY CONTROLLER BUTTONS TO TAP, A CARTRIDGE TO INSERT, AND EVEN A TV THAT CAN MANUALLY SCROLL THROUGH SOME OLD-SCHOOL MARIO ACTION.

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4

1. Pokémon Jumbo Eevee Mega Construx *($49.99; megaconstrux.com)* **2.** Stubbins Plush Game Characters *($14.99; thestubbins.com)* **3.** Moon Spinner Brainteaser *($11.99; thinkfun.com)* **4.** Star Wars Darth Nihilus Figure *($24.99; gamestop.com)*

Full disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of Game Informer

TOYS & COLLECTIBLES

1

2

rock-solid puzzle

3

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$49.99 | hasbropulse.com

4

5

holiday fun

1. BYO Plane Launcher Kit *($22.00; buildyourownkits.com)* **2.** Geode Rock Puzzle *($65.00; uncommongoods.com)* **3.** Marvel Six-inch Gamerverse Avengers *($19.99 each; marvel.hasbro.com)* **4.** Ultimate Armored Lost Predator *($29.99; necaonline.com)* **5.** Gremlins Countdown Calendar *($49.99; jakks.com)* **6.** Castlevania Series 2 Action Figures *($59.97; shop.diamondselecttoys.com)* **7.** Final Fantasy VII Polygon Figures *($64.00; store.na.square-enix-games.com)* **8.** DC Multiverse Wave 3 Figures *($59.99; mcfarlane.com)* **9.** Spider-Man Miles Morales *($520; sideshow.com)*

6
7
best retro pick
8
9

editors' choice:

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by Naomi Novik
$28.00 | penguinrandomhouse.com

Axiom's End **by Lindsay Ellis**
$27.99 | us.macmillan.com

Heroes: The Greek Myths Reimagined **by Stephen Fry**
$29.95 | chroniclebooks.com

The Immortal Hulk, Volume 2
$34.99 | marvel.com

Middlewest Collected Edition, Volume 1
$9.99 | imagecomics.com

Something is Killing the Children Vol. 1
$14.99 | boom-studios.com

DEADLY EDUCATION
NAOMI NOVIK
AXIOM'S END
LINDSAY ELLIS
STEPHEN FRY
HEROES
middlewest
SOMETHING is KILLING the CHILDREN

TABLETOP

1

family pick

2

3

editors' choice:

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THESE AWESOME 3D TILESETS ARE A PERFECT CHOICE FOR DEDICATED RPG DUNGEON CRAWLERS LOOKING TO UP THEIR GAME. MODULAR PIECES AND CONNECTING CLIPS ALLOW YOU TO CREATE CUSTOM ROOM SETUPS FOR BIG ENCOUNTERS; THE DOORS EVEN OPEN AND CLOSE! TAKE YOUR PICK BETWEEN DUNGEONS, TOWNS, AND AN ARRAY OF EXPANSIONS.

$99.99 | wizkids.com

best classic revival

4

1. Succulent *($45.00; renegadegamestudios.com)* **2.** Gridopolis *($49.95; gridopolis.games)* **3.** The Princess Bride Adventure Book Game *($29.99; ravensburger.us)* **4.** 7 Wonders *($59.99; store.us.asmodee.com)* **5.** Tellstones: King's Gambit *($30.00; riotgames.com)* **6.** Small World of Warcraft *($59.99; daysofwonder.com)* **7.** Harry Potter: House Cup Competition *($49.99; theop.games)* **8.** CardKingPro Immense Dice Bag *($35.99; cardkingpro.com)* **9.** Forgotten Waters *($59.95; plaidhatgames.com)* *editors' choice:*

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PANDEMIC
LEGACY
SEASON 0

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5

6

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Harry Potter
HOUSE CUP COMPETITION

7

8

FORGOTTEN WATERS

9

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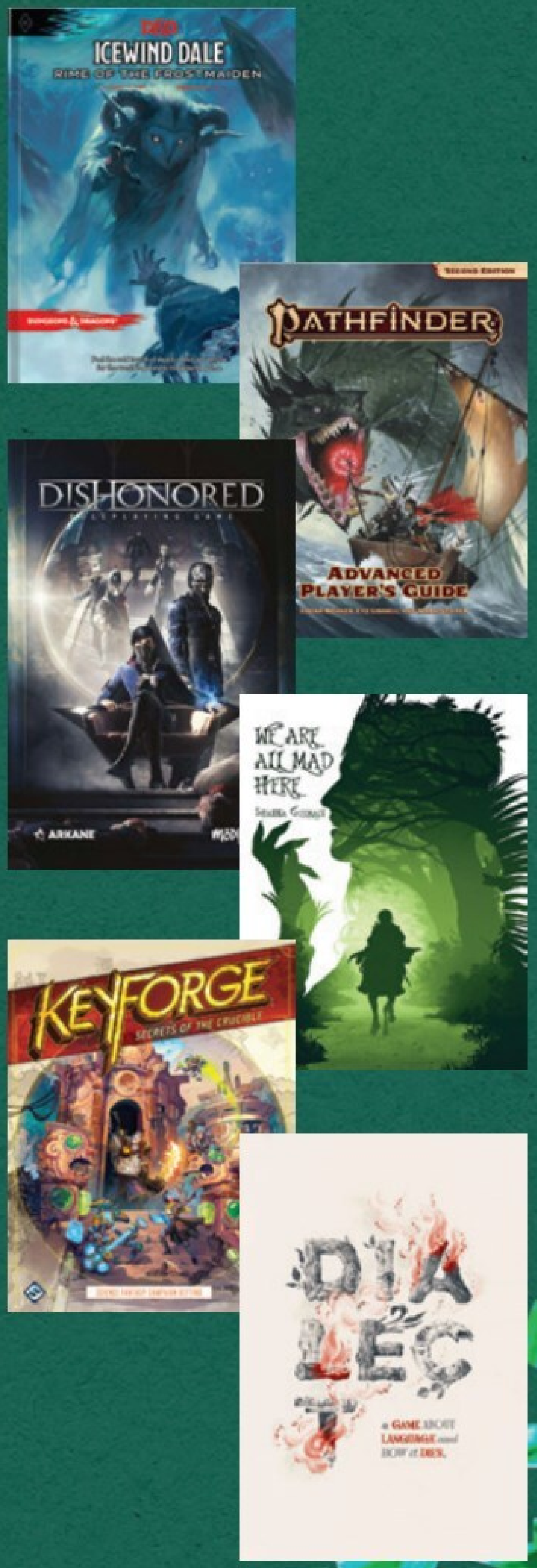
$49.99 | paizo.com

Dishonored RPG Core Rulebook
$39.99 | modiphius.net

Cypher System: We Are All Mad Here
$49.95 | montecookgames.com

Genesys: Keyforge – Secrets of the Crucible
$49.95 | fantasyflightgames.com

Dialect
$29.00 | thornygames.com


ICEWIND DALE
RIME OF THE FROSTMAIDEN
PATHFINDER
ADVANCED PLAYER'S GUIDE
DISHONORED
WE ARE ALL MAD HERE
KEYFORGE
SECRETS OF THE CRUCIBLE
DIALECT

TECH

1

2

3

4

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5

6

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TECH

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1

2

a great space-saver

3

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Music

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$199 | iam8bit.com

Ape Out Vinyl Soundtrack
$29.99 | iam8bit.com

Such Pretty Forks in the Road – Alanis Morissette
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On Circles – Caspian
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Strange Days – The Struts
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Here In Your Bedroom – Kailee Morgue
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THE STRUTS
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Weathering With You
$29.97 | shoutfactory.com

What We Do In The Shadows Season 2
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PICARD
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WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS
FX

HOME

2

forceful floor décor

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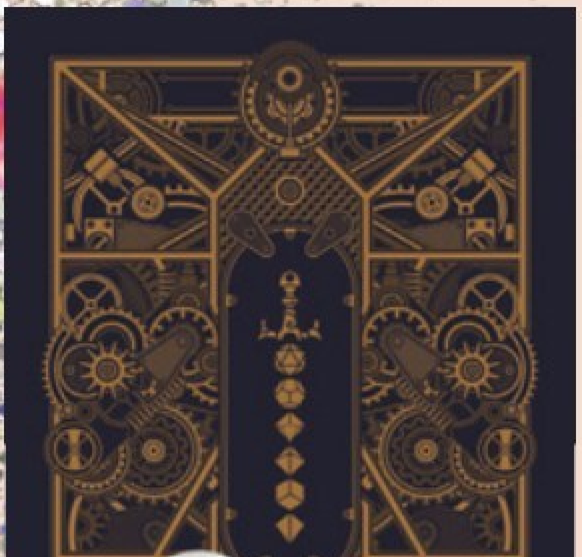
3

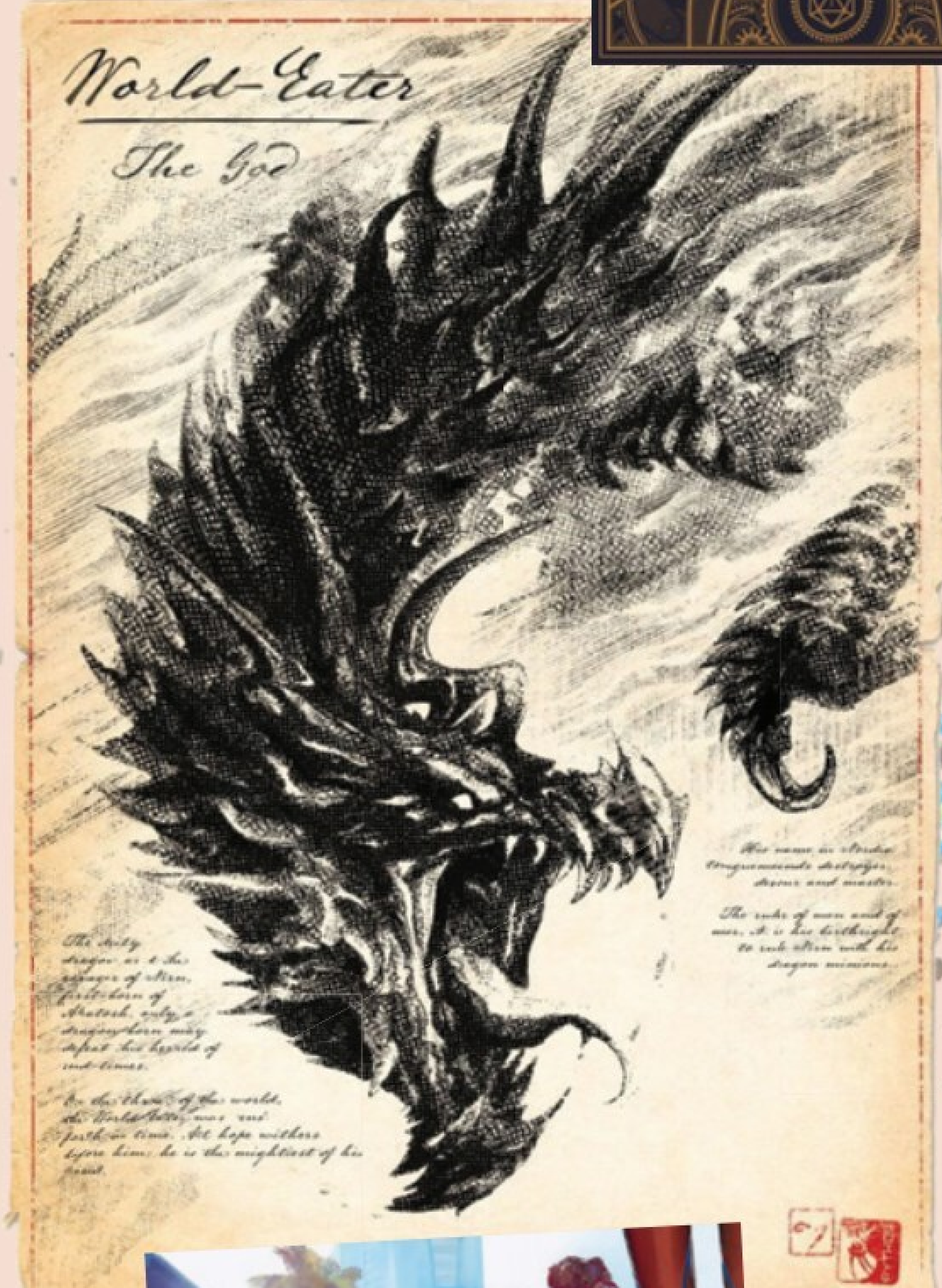


THE DICE GIVETH
20
THE DICE TAKETH AWAY

YOU CAN CERTAINLY TRY

Royal Decanters

4



World-Eater

The God

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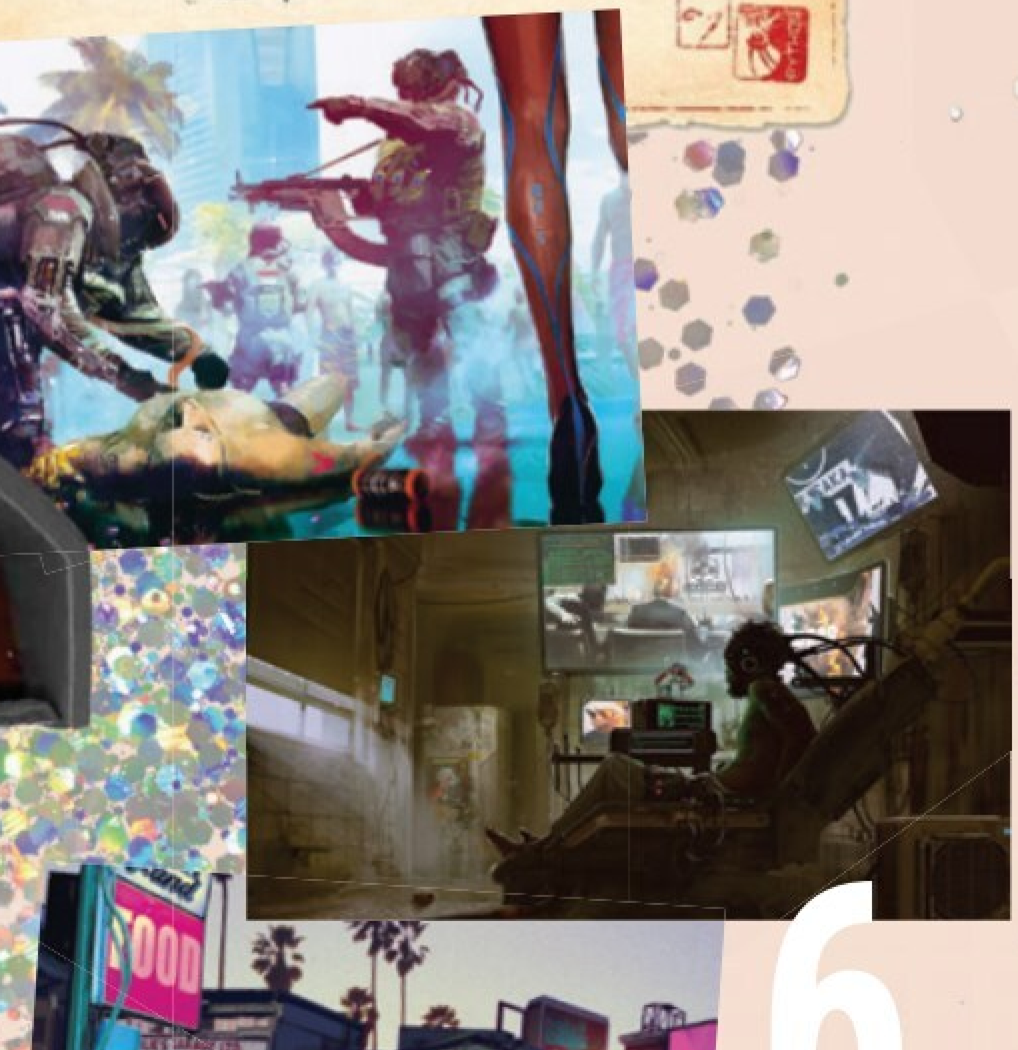

6

editors' choice:

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1

Blood O₂
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6

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2

SUPERMARIO
3

4

5

classy tabletop fashion

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BY ANDREW REINER

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» PLATFORM
PS5 • PS4

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games

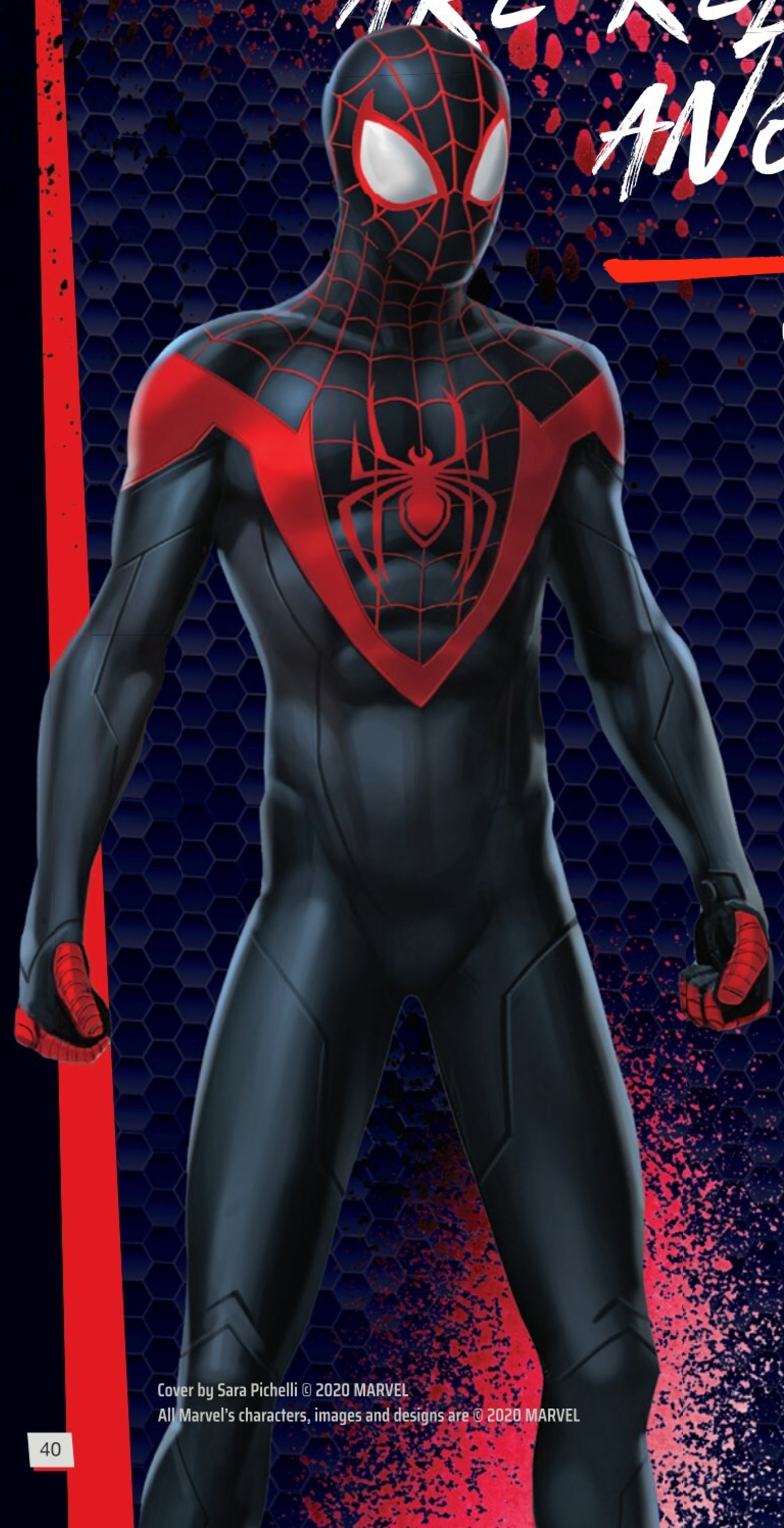
» RELEASE
November 12

MANY OF MARVEL'S ICONIC SUPERHEROES ARE RELICS FROM ANOTHER AGE.

Captain America debuted in 1941 as a beacon of American pride leading into World War II. Under the creative guidance of Stan Lee, the 1960s delivered the wall-crawling Spider-Man, tech-savvy Iron Man, rampaging Hulk, as well as the super teams X-Men and Fantastic Four. Time has not hurt any of these juggernauts. They all have eternal flames that burn brighter as the years fly by.

These heroes are so popular that the spotlight rarely moves off of them to highlight newcomers. Every week, when the latest comic books hit store shelves, Marvel introduces new characters that could be the next heroes that define a generation. In most cases, however, these spandex-laden figures don't capture readers' imaginations, and disappear as quickly as they appear.

Creating a new hero that can stand as tall as Marvel's legends rarely happens, but each decade brings us a few personalities with varying degrees of staying power. The last decade is proving to be a hotbed for video games in particular, especially for this year's big releases. Kamala Khan, who debuted in comics in 2013, was the main character of Crystal Dynamics' Marvel's Avengers game. In just two months we'll get the chance to suit up as Miles Morales in Insomniac Games' Spider-Man sequel. In recent years, Miles has been as prominent in entertainment as any Avengers character. He doesn't have a storied history like many of them do, and his debut in 2011 occurred in a place where a path of success seemed unlikely.



Cover by Sara Pichelli © 2020 MARVEL

All Marvel's characters, images and designs are © 2020 MARVEL

Players once again unlock new suits, such as this wild variation called the 2020 Suit. Many give Miles suit and visor mods

As it turns out, Miles wasn't introduced as a proper Marvel Comics character, and was instead born within the pages of a spinoff imprint called Ultimate Comics. In this alternate timeline to Marvel's main universe, writer Brian Michael Bendis brought readers into the life of Miles, a teenager of Afro-Latino descent who eventually becomes Spider-Man. Ultimate Comics wasn't bound by the history of Marvel's long-running Earth-616 universe, so its creators could rewrite origins and tell dramatically different stories, including one where Peter Parker dies.

As unexpected as this moment was, the void Peter left in the universe created a perfect opening for a new hero to step forward. Miles took his place, and was an instant hit with readers. Sadly, his rise in fame happened at the wrong time; Ultimate Comics was on its last leg, and the imprint delivered its final issue in 2015.

Miles' popularity continued to grow, however, and Marvel knew it couldn't leave him behind in this dead universe. Through a cosmic event (which comics are notorious for using to rewrite the rules of their continuities), Miles and his supporting cast migrated to Marvel's Earth-616 universe. With Peter alive and well in this timeline, Miles' story unfolded in a much different way than fans originally latched onto. And this has been a problem for Miles. In the short time he's been with us, his origin has been told a number of different ways. We saw this happen twice in 2018, the year that cemented him as Marvel's next big hero.

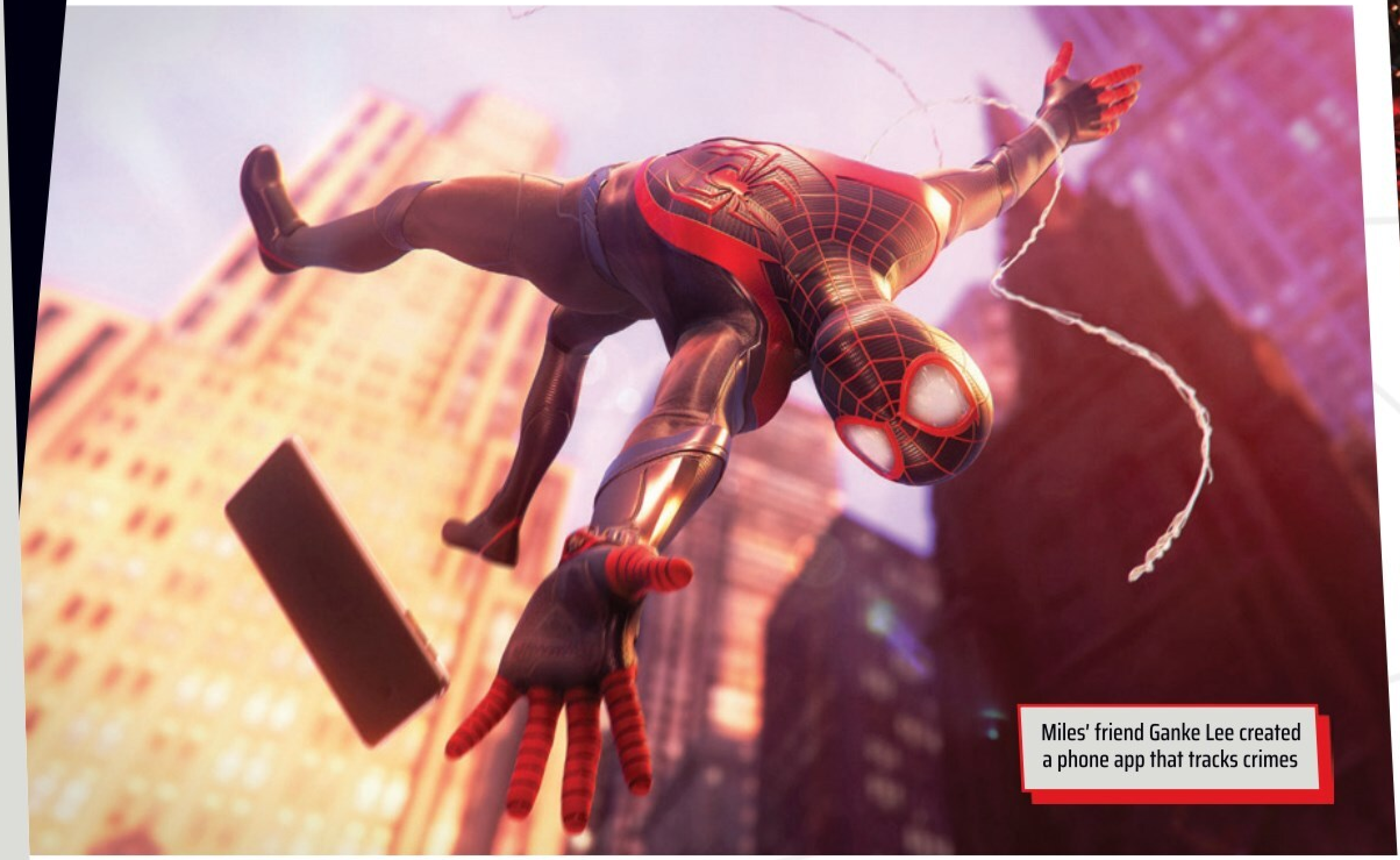
He was the lead character in the brilliant *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* animated film, which again shook up his origin story. He was also a key player in Insomniac's Spider-Man game, which focused on Peter's heroics, but also told a new origin story for Miles in the margins. Within this excellent game, the seed was planted for Miles and Peter to unite as Spider-Men in a sequel. Within the framework of Peter's story, we saw flashes of what this dynamic spider duo could be.

Insomniac is delivering on that vision in Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, but not in the way you would expect. This sequel is mainly about Miles and his growth as a hero. Peter is not entirely gone, but is mostly in the shadows, playing the role of mentor.

In the first game, players suited up as a Spider-Man in his prime. Miles, on other hand, is just learning the ropes and doesn't even know his true capabilities. A year after being bit by a spider, his power is still coming online, and he's starting to figure out what it means to be a hero. He's eager to impress, but is also prone to make mistakes.

His rise to power and the struggles that come with it create a fascinating narrative web that feels different than the first game. Even though Miles is in the spotlight, Peter's story also moves forward, giving us a good sense of progression for Insomniac's expanding spider-verse, much like how the Marvel Cinematic Universe unfolds through the lens of different characters. Insomniac isn't crafting a side story; it's a true sequel that will likely set the stage for what comes next – even if it is a little shorter than its predecessor.

I was treated to the opening moments of Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales running on PlayStation 5. In this introduction, Insomniac wastes no time raising the superhero stakes and inviting players into a soulful story filled with fascinating characters – some you'll recognize, others are new creations. The opening sequence is about as action-packed as they come – perhaps one of the biggest to kick off any game – and involves a familiar villain who inadvertently helps Miles become a dramatically different Spider-Man.



Miles' friend Ganke Lee created a phone app that tracks crimes

POWER SURGE

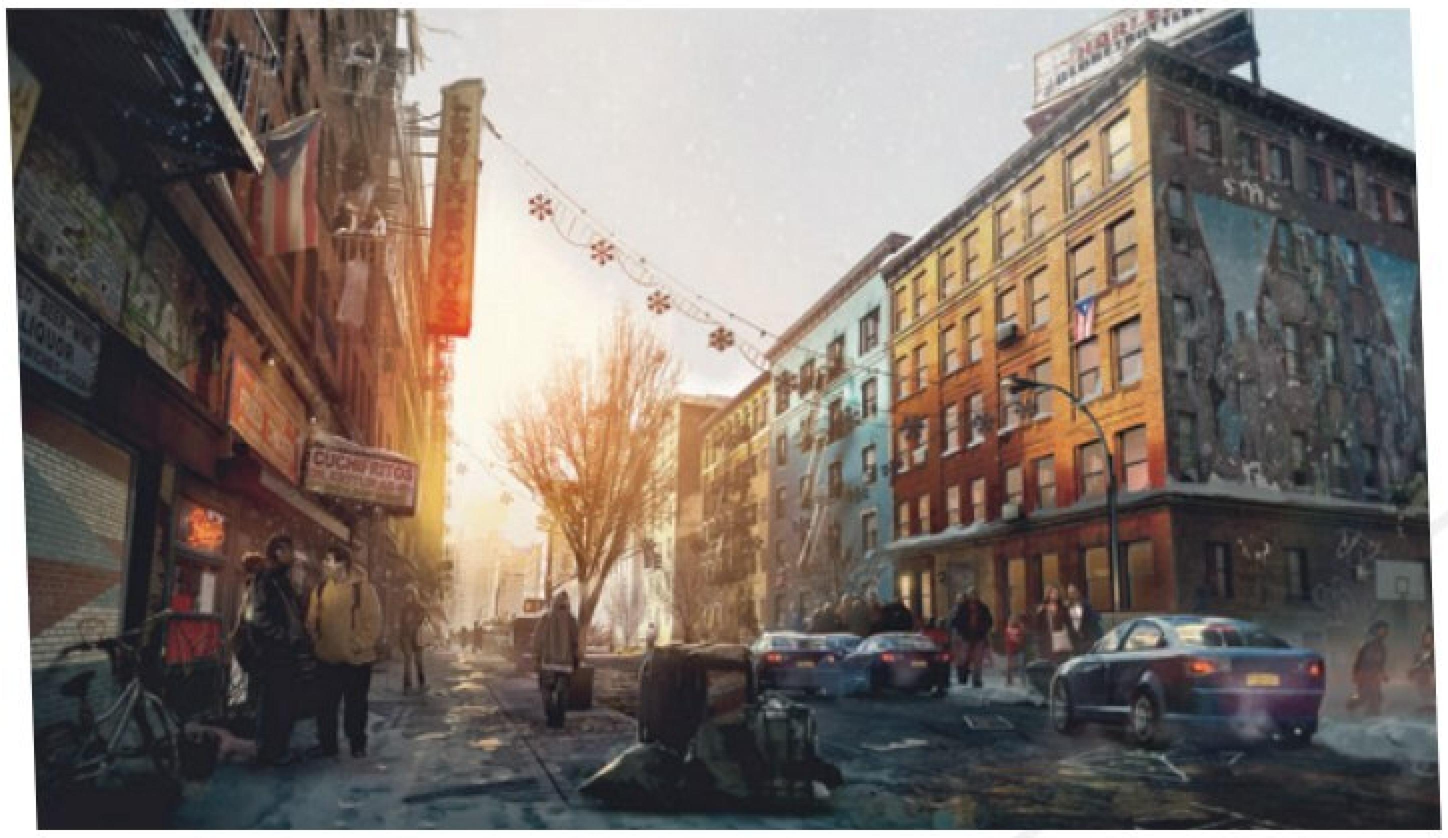
Set one year after the fall of Doctor Octopus, it's the first day of winter break for 17-year-old high-schooler Miles Morales. We first see him on the subway, checking his phone nonchalantly as he waits for his stop. Miles is dressed for the cold weather, wearing a parka with a fur hood that looks a little bit like a lion's mane. He isn't heading home to Brooklyn. Following the tragic death of his father, his mother has relocated them to her childhood home in Harlem.

When Miles arrives at his stop, he politely lets other passengers leave before he departs and ascends the station's stairs, moving from the darkened underground to a vibrant and festive Harlem street. Colors burst from every vector as numerous cultures collide and give the neighborhood the feeling of life and joy in a single frame. The dull brickwork of the old high-rises hides behind giant, colorful murals. Even these works of art are partially obscured by holiday decorations galore.

As Miles steps onto the bustling street, he puts his headphones on and grooves to beats as he looks for a market. His mother asked him to pick up some groceries for tonight's dinner. In this moment, he can't escape her presence. Across the street, a folding table is decked out in political propaganda and fliers for Rio Morales, his mother, who just happens to be running for city council. Miles doesn't bat an eye at his mother's campaign, and is instead drawn to a multi-story mural that is currently being painted. It's Peter Parker's Spider-Man. Miles confronts the artist and asks if he'll be adding the “new Spider-Man” as well.

The artist shrugs and replies “The original is my guy, you know?” Miles smiles, and as he begins walking away, turns, and in jest again makes a comment about leaving room for the second Spider-Man.

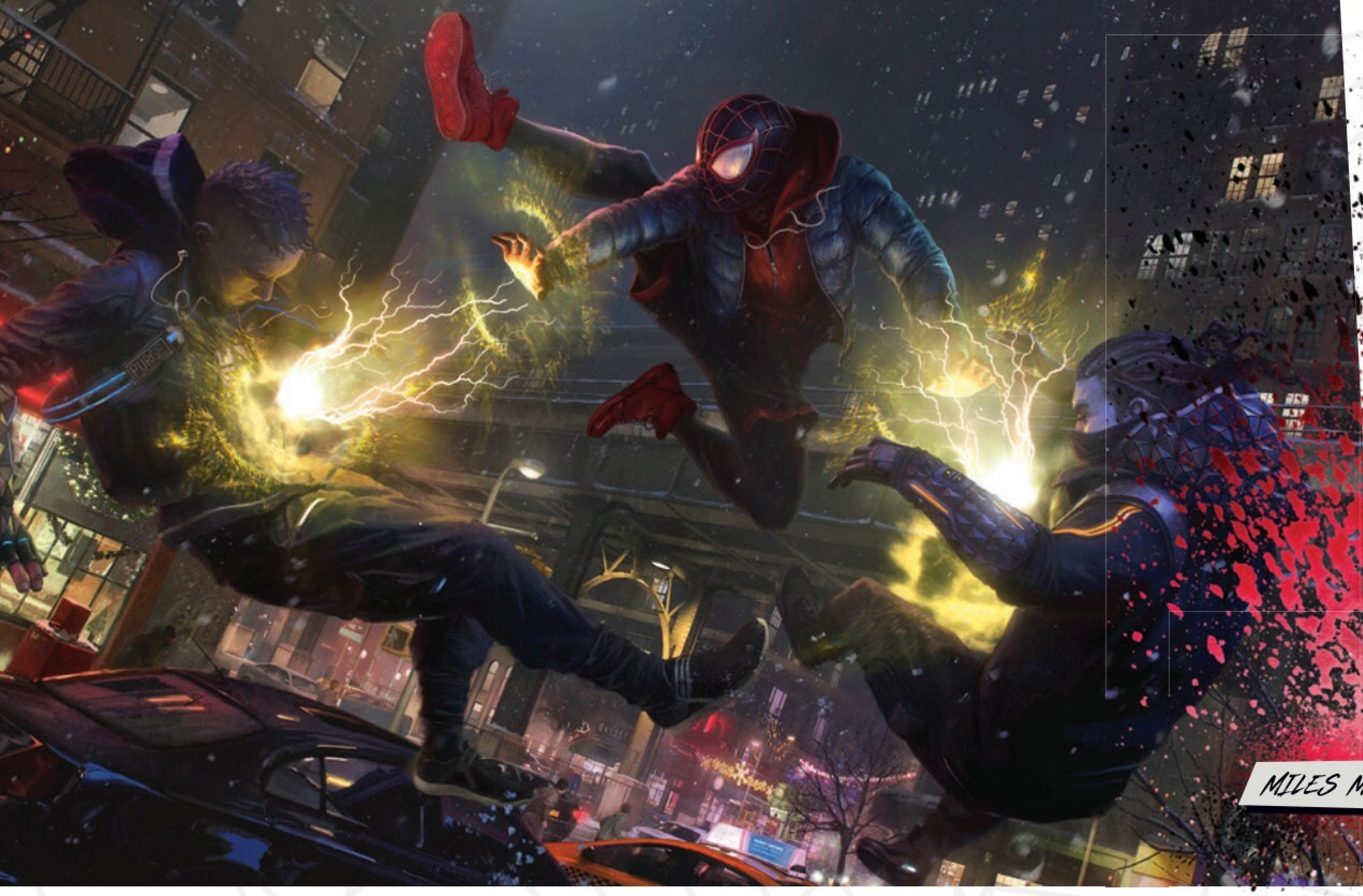
Miles is once again voiced by the exceptionally talented Nadji Jeter, who also voices the younger version of the character on Disney XD's animated Spider-Man show. For this sequel, Jeter has matured Miles a little. “When he is Spider-Man, he is a different person,” a wide-smiled Jeter tells me over a Zoom call. “He's not that kid anymore. He's that man. He's that leader. It was a great transition, but I also needed it to blend everything together, to make it human.”



The amount of detail in Harlem makes you want to stop Miles dead in his tracks to see what people are up to, and to soak in the flow of life unfolding all around him. One particular person is losing the battle of loading a couch onto a moving truck, and Miles is quick to help him. Other people are chatting with one another, selling wares on the sidewalks, or sitting on their front stoops relaxing and doing a little people-watching of their own. Little clumps of snow are tucked into most shadowed areas, and the street looks slick with ice and water. Any hint of liquid pops with realism, thanks in part to PlayStation 5's new ray-tracing and lighting techniques. You can see the city looking back at you in the puddles or off of a parked car's shiny steel.

Harlem was featured in the first Spider-Man game, but Insomniac gave it a fresh coat of paint in this sequel. The area players traverse is largely the same in terms of size, but the streets and buildings have taken on a whole new life, both to capture the realism of this location – especially the culture-rich eastern part of Harlem – and also to provide more interesting locations for Miles' story to unfold. Players will see far more detail than before, with new landmarks and a variety of different architectural features in the same map footprint. Numerous consultants were brought in to help ensure Harlem's atmosphere was just right.

“I'd like to say Harlem is one of the most important characters in our game,” says creative director Brian Horton. “Harlem



MILES MORALES

really has a pulse, and is what Miles is fighting for. What we decided is Harlem and the people he loves are the heart and soul of this game. Miles getting to know his neighborhood was essential."

After a short walk, Miles eventually finds the store his mom sent him to – it's small, but inviting with a bright yellow exterior. Before he can enter, he gets a text message from Peter that informs him the convoy is leaving and he needs to "shake a leg." Without batting an eye, Miles removes his headphones, transitions from a walk to run, and in the next shot we see of him, his identity is hidden beneath Spider-Man's mask. Even though he's training under Peter, he doesn't have a high-tech suit of his own – only the mask is the real deal, made up of the iconic red color with white eyes outlined in black. His crime-fighting outfit is homemade, consisting of a blue winter jacket, red hoodie underneath it, with a black spider painted on it (the head pointing down). His lower body is even less superhero-like with black leggings underneath black athletic shorts. His feet are hidden beneath pristine and electric red sneakers.

In this first web-swinging moment, Miles whips through the sky, looking like he knows what he's doing, but his motions are not as refined or fluid as Peter's. Miles is lanky, and it doesn't appear he has great control of his legs; on most swings, they jet in front of him, extend wildly, and spin slowly in circular motions, looking a bit like a human helicopter. Game director Cameron Christian says this is just one of the ways that Miles is different from Peter.

"We knew he was still learning his abilities and figuring out how he would be Spider-Man," adds Christian. "We wanted to show that in the animation a lot. If you look at his motion, he's a little less sure, a little more gangly. You can see that in his swinging and basic attacks."

Miles swings with urgency, soaring across a festive Manhattan that is ready for the holiday season. He grazes the ground a few times in the openings and streets, but keeps his momentum long enough to glide into a stack of skyscrapers that he uses to reach a safe altitude again.

His mother, unaware of his current acrobatics, calls him, asking where he is and if he has the stuff she asked for. Flustered, Miles lies to her, saying the store didn't have what she wanted, and he needs to check another one downtown. He then makes a quip to himself about how challenging it is to be a hero and normal person – something Peter continues to struggle with nine years in.

Miles runs up a huge skyscraper, his legs churning fast, and he uses ziplines to pull himself up in big, quick busts. When he reaches the rooftop, Peter slowly slides down on a web line in front of him, his mask half off, almost appearing like he wants to recreate the scene from Sam Raimi's Spider-Man film where he kisses Mary Jane. Peter instead lifts a coffee up to his mouth and takes a sip from this odd, upside-down position. Miles is impressed he can drink this way.

After a brief chat about what's happening, Peter and Miles leap off of the building just in time to join a massive police helicopter called Helix 2. Dangling below it is an equally sizable cargo container. Peter says that a prisoner is inside. Following the breakout at Raft caused by the Sinister Six, hundreds of escapees are being brought back, including Vulture, Scorpion, and "something bigger."

THE WRITERS' ROOM

Insomniac's talented writing staff for this sequel includes Ben Arfmann, the lead writer; Mary Kenney, a writer who joined the project in the middle of production; and Evan Narcisse, who was called in to be a narrative-design consultant. Narcisse wrote the Marvel comic-book series *Rise of the Black Panther*, and also penned one line of dialogue for the first Spider-Man game that Peter says when he discovers the Wakandan Embassy. When the team first sat down to discuss what this story would be, they wanted to tell a modern coming-of-age story about a teenager who is surrounded by friends and family, is open and independent, and, as Arfmann puts it, "is falling in love with a new place."

The giant inmate of note is in the container and doesn't like being confined in this way, something we learn when he rams the inside of the crate with impressive force. The long, rectangular holding cell swings back and forth violently, so much so that one of the cables suspending it snaps. Miles goes in for the save, despite Peter telling him to stay back. Miles creates a webline to snag the loose end of the container, a play that looks fortuitous at first, but his angle is off and he doesn't have great control of the line given his odd positioning. As he flips through the air, the line gets caught in one of the helicopter's propellers. Airborne chaos ensues and the helicopter crashes to the ground with full force, immediately turning into a smoldering heap that slides along the street, taking out police cars, stoplights, and a ground transport that is hauling more prisoners. The container is further damaged, just enough to allow its occupant to punch free. It's Rhino, looking every bit as massive and angry as he did in the first game. His eyes glow menacingly.

Miles and Peter drop to the ground and stand side-by-side ready to take the titan down. "Hello, tiny spiders," Rhino says dryly.

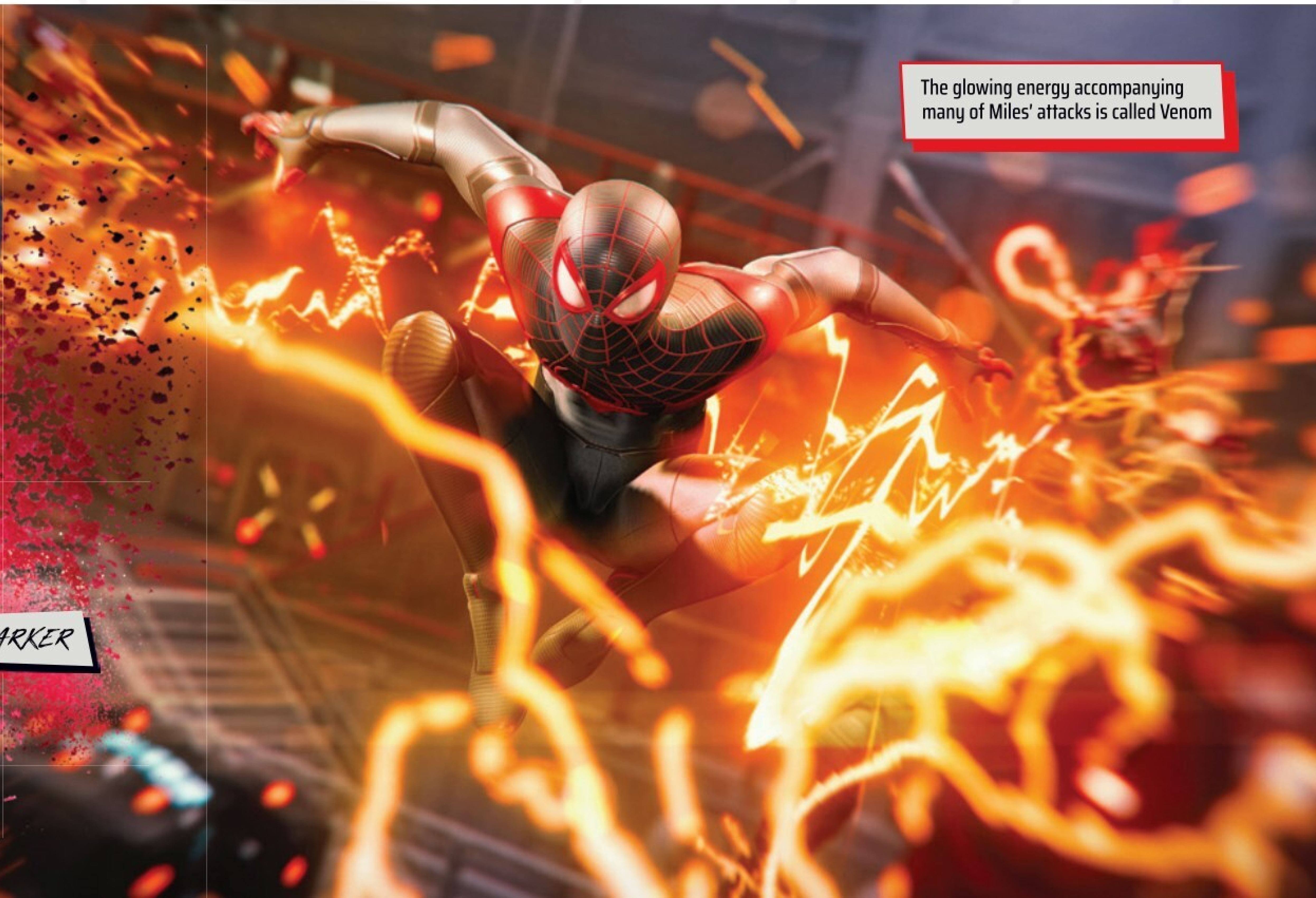
The prisoners from the ground transport are also freed. Peter says he'll handle Rhino, and he does so without beating an eye, leaping to the air and mounting the villain like he's a bucking bull. Rhino responds by running full tilt into anything he can – cars, walls, nothing stops his rage. Miles says he'll mop up the inmates, who are rummaging through police vehicle wreckage for any weapons they can find.

This is the game's first combat encounter; its scale and setup perfectly echo Peter's from the first game. Miles begins with a few lightning-quick web shots that lift an inmate off of the ground and pin him to the side of a vehicle. Two webs to the feet of another inmate followed by a quick yank lifts the orange-suited foe high into the air, where he hangs for a second before being slammed to the ground. Miles then uses his spider sense to dodge a few incoming shots, giving him an opportunity to lean heavily into his legs to deliver a flurry of attacks that take out the last of the inmates, all while Rhino and Peter rodeo nearby.

Rhino realizes his tactics aren't working, and decides to take Peter for a ride down the street where he eventually leaps a good five to six stories into the air to smash through the side of a tall building. The amount of destruction delivered in this moment is a sight to behold. At first there's a puff of smoke, followed by the loosening of a giant holiday sign that crashes to the ground as bricks pour around it like rain. Miles gives chase, jumping into the building's breezy new opening and scooting quickly through the interior, which is filled with startled people who appear to be at a party given the festive decorations near them. "Sorry! Happy holidays," Miles says as he flips every which way across tables and debris before emerging through a matching hole Rhino made on the other side of the building.

Rhino now knows the second Spider-Man is in hot pursuit, and rips a parking sign off of a wall to throw at Miles. This brings up a dramatic, slow-motion sequence in which the player needs to dodge to the left or right. The chase leads to a park with a tall Christmas tree sitting in the center of it,

PETER PARKER



The glowing energy accompanying many of Miles' attacks is called Venom

THE KNOWN SUITS

Players unlock a variety of different looks for Miles as the adventure unfolds. The number of suits isn't as high as it was in the first game – both from the story not being as long and from the fact that Marvel hasn't created that many for Miles in his nine years of existence.

Most of the suits come with mods that give the players different abilities, and also new visor mods that allow Miles to see different things, like highlighted enemies. One visor mod even makes more gadget ammo drop; the thinking is that the visor helps him spot it in the environment. Since Miles is a new character, Insomniac didn't alter his look too much like they did with Peter's Advanced Suit. They want people to connect with a similar look to what is currently in the comics.

In our demo we saw six different suits in action. As of this writing, Insomniac didn't want to divulge the potential mods they deliver.

BEGINNER SUIT

This is what Miles wears at the beginning of the game. Apart from the mask, this suit is normal civilian clothing, including a blue winter jacket, red hoodie, and black shorts with leggings. He is also rocking awesome sneakers. Shoes apparently play a big role in the game. A collectible?

GIFT SUIT

True to the name, this suit is gifted to Miles as his first full-blown Spider-Man getup. It isn't armored or advanced like Peter's latest threads, and instead looks like a pair of pajamas. The colors are Spider-Man's traditional red and blue, with a little more blue than normal.

ICONIC SUIT

Featured on the game's box art, this is Miles' go-to suit. Although it's mostly black, it's made of different materials, providing more armored protection in some spots, and flexible materials in others.

T.R.A.C.K. SUIT

A new creation from Marvel artist Javier Garrón, this suit is white from head-to-toe with a giant red spider on the chest and red racing stripes down the sides. It's a slick and different look.

CAT SUIT

How do you top shirtless Spider-Man from the first game? Put a masked cat in a backpack.

2020 SUIT

Looking like something pulled from a Tron movie or Deadmau5 concert, Miles wears a black and silver helmet with LED eyes. His fingers, sneakers, and the spider on his chest also light up in a striking red tone.

which Miles barely avoids, and then continues into a parking garage where cars are knocked every which way. Peter is eventually thrown from Rhino, but Miles is quick to take his spot on the villain's shoulders, and the player maintains complete control.

At this point, Insomniac turns a sequence that is already roaring with excitement up another notch. Rhino again smashes through a wall, this one leading into the massive Glam Mall, which is filled with highly detailed shops and numerous floors lined with shoppers. Rhino uses a spacious rotunda opening to descend to the bottom floor, and then races feverishly toward Santa's workshop, which looks a lot like a medieval castle at the far end of the mall.

Rather than smashing through the castle, Rhino eyes a window above it, soaring carelessly into what appears to be Santa's green room. It turns out this mall Santa is played by none other than J. Jonah Jameson. When Miles and Rhino enter his room, Jameson is screaming about how much he hates Spider-Man. He screams even more when he sees the wall crawler. Jameson was here to record another one of his *Just the Facts* podcasts, which return for this sequel. The hilarious ranting by Jameson is penned by longtime comic scribe Christos Gage, who was brought on the project just to write this angry reporter's dialogue. Insomniac says he writes him better than anyone.

Rhino's trail of destruction just keeps going and getting bigger. Cars, buildings, and everything in his path are knocked out of the way with impressive visuals accompanying each hit. The confrontation eventually leads to a gas tank that Rhino knows could conclude the battle, saying: "Let us raise the temperature." The gas tank explodes when he collides with it, rocketing both Spider-Men a good distance away. The blast is huge, hitting a Roxxon Corporation factory nearby. Small explosions ripple through the building interior, jetting fire out of its windows. Peter, who is looking a bit ragged with tears in his suit, is left to fight Rhino on his own, and he's not up for the challenge. Miles can't help him because more escaped inmates have arrived. Peter is punted violently into a wall and is knocked nearly unconscious. Miles joins him when he can. In a weakened state, Peter tells Miles to leave, but his friend stands at his side.

Miles is angry, afraid, and panicked. His right hand lights up with a golden glow as he walks slowly toward Rhino. He rears back and delivers a massive bioelectrical punch directly into Rhino's chest. A new ability has awakened within him, and it absolutely clobbers this nearly unstoppable foe. With a newfound vigor driving his actions, Miles confidently approaches Rhino, who is now enraged. This is the game's first boss fight, and I don't want to give away what happens next, but it is every bit as big of a set piece as the opening moments of play, which are far larger in scope and more chaotic than anything seen in the first game. Insomniac got its feet wet with Spider-Man in 2018, and it was a hell of a debut, but the development team has learned some new tricks to amp up the action, and the fruits of those labors are fully on display here. You couldn't ask for a better intro to a game.

Miles won't have to sneak away from Rhino this time

A NEW THREAT

In the aftermath of the battle, Roxxon trucks pull up to the nearly demolished factory. Armored guards in menacing crimson colors emerge from these vehicles, all with heavy weaponry, plus pistols strapped to their chests for apparent last stands. A black limousine also arrives; a back door opens to reveal the wide smile of Simon Krieger, the director of Roxxon's NuForm energy project, who just happens to be played by Troy Baker. Simon doesn't care that the building was destroyed, and instead takes a keen interest in Miles, who looks like he's been through hell with cotton popping out of exposed seams on his coat and tears on his hoodie. Simon is impressed Miles battled Rhino on his own, and gives him a look like he'll see him again soon. It's an unnerving conversation, especially given Roxxon's rise in New York City, and Harlem in particular.

Roxxon has created and successfully tested a new clean-energy source called NuForm, and is quickly constructing power plants across the city. Its billboards are all over town, as are its soldiers for some reason. In the moment of this demo, Roxxon looks imposing, but has not been established as anything other than an up-and-coming company. Insomniac, however, tells us this corporation is the main antagonist of the game.

The Tinkerer's identity is unknown, but she appears to be young

"At first [Roxxon] comes in saying they are going to revitalize Harlem using Simon's PR lens," Horton says. "There's an insidious truth behind all of that, and what this story uncovers is what is the truth of NuForm, what is all of that about?"

The world at large has no idea what Roxxon is really up to, but a shadow organization known as The Underground does, and is working to disrupt Roxxon's operations however it can. Its members have even arranged a hit to rob the NuForm canisters being hauled by a transport truck. The Underground is organized, and its soldiers are equipped with state-of-the-art nanotechnology that can make weapons appear like magic, forming to the arms of their soldiers in a flash. Roxxon's troops are always decked out in red. The Underground's are purple. We don't know who sits at the top of The Underground, but one of the top lieutenants is the Tinkerer, an old Marvel Comics villain created in 1963. Back then, the Tinkerer was an old man who blackmailed politicians by bugging their electronics. Now, the Tinkerer is a youthful, athletic woman who speaks through a modulated voice.

In an alternate gameplay sequence that sees Roxxon and Underground forces squaring off against one another on a bridge, we get a taste of the Tinkerer in action. This mysterious figure ignores Spider-Man's presence, and wastes no time shooting two tendrils from the wrists to yank the doors off of a truck. The tendrils look a bit like Doctor Octopus' arms, but much smaller. Spider-Man tries to stop the robbery, but the Tinkerer cannot be deterred, using a nano-powered ability to create a purple electrified shell that bursts with energy and sends Spidey flying.

Insomniac isn't talking about many villains at this point, which is a much different approach than the studio had with the first game, announcing the Sinister Six well before launch. In not wanting to reveal who Miles will face off against, Horton did smile, and say that other villains from Marvel's Spider-Man universe will come out of the woodwork, but it won't be as many as Peter battled.

AND THEN THERE WAS ONE

In the aftermath of the Rhino encounter, Peter and Miles take a breather, again meeting on a rooftop where they can safely remove their masks to have a personal moment. Peter is jealous of Miles' bioelectrical ability and wants to do some research on it.

THE CELL PHONE

Ganke Lee wants to help his friend Miles however he can from the sidelines. Ganke invents a phone app called the Friendly Neighborhood Spider App. The app connects all of the neighborhoods in Manhattan and rounds up crimes and activities reported by the citizens. The app replaces the police-scanner concept, and was created so players don't have to enter a menu to bring up new missions.

Swiping left on the DualSense's touchpad brings up the phone in the lower-right corner of the screen. The game enters a slow-motion state at this point, and the player can scroll up and down to pick an activity or press L1 or R1 to switch to crimes or other things. When a mission is picked, the camera points in its direction, a waypoint is brought up, and the action resumes at the normal pace.

The cell phone is nicely designed, features all sorts of fun animated graphics (some of Ganke), and doesn't take up much of the screen.

The act of Peter removing his mask is one of the most shocking moments I saw in any of the gameplay sequences. His face looks completely different, and it's not because he's aged one year. Much like Sony moving on from Tobey Maguire to Andrew Garfield, Insomniac turned to a new model to bring Peter's looks to life in the game.

The reason for the change was to find a better facial match for voice actor Yuri Lowenthal, who reprises his role as Peter. The new likeness belongs to British model Ben Jordan. If you play the PlayStation 5 remaster of Marvel's Spider-Man, Jordan's likeness replaces John Bubniak. Insomniac wanted to create consistency between the two games, and that meant making the difficult decision to change Peter's look. Lining up a better facial fit for Lowenthal helped streamline development since Insomniac is using a new scanning process.

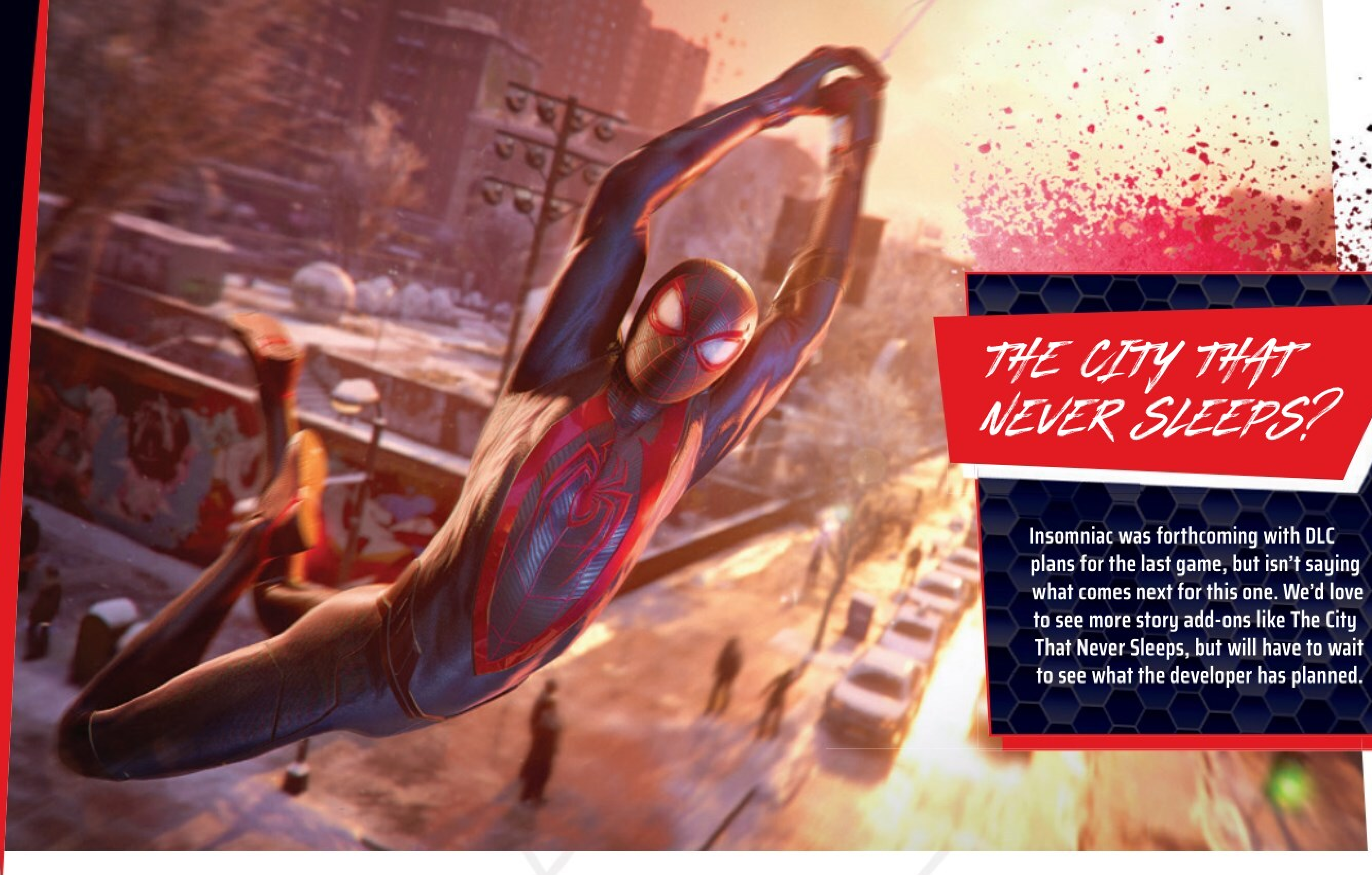
In this slow moment shared between the new Spider-Man and the new-looking Spider-Man, Peter hands Miles a present, and asks him to recite the Spider-Man oath. "I promise to do everything in my power to protect this city," Miles says back to his teacher, who obviously just made it up as a joke. He then breaks some bad news to Miles, saying that Mary Jane is heading to Symkaria for a few weeks to cover peace talks for *The Daily Bugle*, and that he is joining her as her photographer. Miles is rightfully overwhelmed by the news, but Peter continues poking at his friend.

Before leaping away, he tells Miles that he's now "New York's only Spider-Man."

Miles doesn't open the gift before meeting up with his friend Ganke Lee, who just happens to be staying at his house for the duration of the break. Lee is a talented programmer and designer, and he's even made Miles a handy phone app to keep tabs on crime in the neighborhood.

The gift Peter gave Miles contains a complete Spider-Man suit – Miles' first. It's blue and red, but isn't the most flattering material, looking like it's made out of cotton rather than an armor or sturdy material. The new suit looks a bit like pajamas, but are symbolic – a way of Peter telling his student that he aced the test and that he's moving on to bigger and better things. When Miles puts on this suit's red mask, a heads-up display ignites. He's plugged into Peter's network.

Miles also learns that Peter created a number of challenges that will help him hone his abilities, even though his mentor won't be around physically. Peter is represented as a hologram at these challenge locations. They come in three varieties: traversal, combat, and stealth. When the player completes these challenges, they unlock skills in a new skill tree.



THE CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS?

Insomniac was forthcoming with DLC plans for the last game, but isn't saying what comes next for this one. We'd love to see more story add-ons like The City That Never Sleeps, but will have to wait to see what the developer has planned.

VENOM, JUST NOT THAT ONE

Given where the last game left off, the well-known Spider-Man villain Venom will likely be a part of Insomniac's Spider-Man story, but we may not see him in this chapter. We asked Horton if the Venom and Green Goblin teases that were left dangling in that game's final moments would continue into this story. He didn't outright say "no," yet made their inclusion sound like a longshot in revealing "the threads from the first game still exist, but we're really focusing on Miles' chapter and how he is going to become Spider-Man."

From that message, we probably won't see Venom munching on brains, but a different kind of Venom will be onscreen whenever Miles enters combat. That glowing wallop he gave to Rhino is called the Venom Punch. Yes, we know it's a confusing naming convention, but it comes from the comics and is a big part of what makes Miles unique. In this game's lore, Venom is a term coined by Ganke when he learns that Miles' bioelectricity stings. We don't know how Ganke learns this, but we hope it's from a test that doesn't go as planned.

The venom attacks transform Miles into an entirely different Spider-Man. When he's in the zone pummeling evildoers, he glows and sizzles on the battlefield, sometimes looking like an erratic shooting star that darts every which way.

In terms of controller mapping, to perform a venom attack, the player holds L1 and then taps a face button, each of which executes a different move. For the famed Venom Punch of note, the player hits L1 and square. When this devastating blow is performed on PlayStation 5's DualSense controller, holding L1 makes the venom charge, and you'll feel it build up with an increasing rumble on the left side of the controller until the move is completed. At that point the venom flows through the controller to the right side and rumbles again when you hit the square button.

All of these glowing attacks cause something called Venom Stun on impact. Any enemy that is stunned takes bonus damage from additional attacks. The foes light up as an electrical current ripples across their bodies. Given how potent these unique attacks are, Miles can't perform them on a whim. The player must first fill up the Venom Power meter (which is just like Peter's Focus meter), thus creating strategies for when and who it's best to use these attacks against.

James Ham, the senior animator on this project, says that while the Venom Punch is iconic to Miles, he uses his legs more than his fists in combat since he doesn't have the upper-body strength of his mentor. "Peter likes to uppercut, and we still want the same mechanic of knocking the enemy up in the air, but Miles does it differently," he says. "I looked up indoor-skydiving competitions. When the skydivers are in the air, and the fan keeps them levitated, they use their legs to kick them around to stay levitated. I wanted to bring a little bit of that into Miles."

With this visual in mind, one of Miles' moves is called a Venom Jump, which propels him a good 15 feet into the air, his legs spiraling out violently to clobber anyone that is sucked up in the updraft. Many of the finishing moves also lean into the lower body, like a slow-moving swan kick that launches enemies high into the air and sets them up for a powerful web takedown.

Camera placement in combat is more dynamic than before, giving the player a better look at the cool animations, as well as a better feel for attack impact points. For venom abilities, the camera zooms in and the action may slow to accentuate the strike. Moving the camera may sound like a simple change, but it was something Insomniac tinkered with long into development to make sure the player always felt they were in control and the game wasn't playing for them.

In all of the combat sequences we saw, Insomniac leaned heavily into Miles' venom abilities, showing us a quick Venom Dash that sent an enemy hurtling into a wall. We also saw examples of how one Venom Punch can stun multiple foes at once. They just need to be near one another. The player can easily group numerous foes together using a new gadget called Gravity Well, which does exactly what you would expect – any adversary nearby is pulled to the center of the well. Gadgets are handled just like they were in the first game, and yet, Peter clearly doesn't like sharing with Miles, as many of Peter's go-to items are nowhere to be found. Miles has instead created his own set of tools.

"Another awesome gadget that we have is a remote mine," Christian adds. "It's kind of like an amped-up electric web. It's a mine that delivers an electric AOE that you can activate when you want. You can just shoot it out and pop it to take someone out, or you might put it on a guy during stealth, and then wait until he walks near some friends, and then blow it up to take them all out. It was something to help complement our stealth gameplay, but you can also use it in active combat."

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THE SNEAKING SPIDER

If Miles swings up to an area patrolled by enemy forces and hasn't alerted any of them, the player has the option to stealthily take them out, one by one. Like the fevered combat, stealth was handled exceptionally well in the first game, and will be even deeper this time around.

In the simplest form of stealth, vertical spaces once again allow for silent takedowns, where Miles lurks above an enemy from a beam, grabs them with a webline, knocks them unconscious with a kick to the face, and then leaves them dangling harmlessly out of sight. When it comes to silently removing foes, Miles is better than Peter since he has the ability to perform takedowns from ceilings and walls; both vantage points deliver unique animations.

If an enemy spots Miles, the stealth sequence ends and normal combat unfolds … if you want it to. This time around, players have the ability to reset stealth using another one of Miles' unique abilities. He can camouflage himself for short periods of time, disappearing completely from the battlefield. He's still barely visible to the player as a shimmer.

Camouflage is an innate power that is performed by hitting up on the directional pad, and is tied to a separate power meter that the player need to keep an eye on. It refills rather quickly, but drains even faster.

When camo is initiated, Miles can stand directly in front of an enemy and initiate a takedown. Alternatively, if he is spotted in an encounter, he can activate camo, disappear from view, find a new hiding spot, and then wait for the enemies to stop searching for him. Some adversaries will panic and start firing their guns wildly, or may even throw grenades to flush him out or hopefully wound him.

"The Roxxon enemies have anti-Miles abilities," Horton says. "They've engineered their tech, and have shields that can reflect and deflect your bioelectric venom. They also have characters who have special goggles that allow them to see your heat signature, so your camouflage isn't effective, and they send out alerts that basically pop you out of camo. We wanted to subvert Miles' power with Roxxon and that's really where Roxxon plays a different role from the Underground, which has programmable matter weapons that are dynamic and exciting."

Both stealth and hand-to-hand combat are supported fully in the skill tree. Applying points in particular fields allows the player to sculpt Miles to a preferred approach, be it offensive with venom attacks or stealthy with camo. Players can also turn camo into an offensive tool; you can use it to get extra hits to build combos.

THE OPEN WORLD

Between story missions, the player is once again invited to explore New York City to take on various activities, hunt for collectibles, and enjoy the thrill of web swinging, which functions just as it did before, but will feel quite different on PlayStation 5. When you shoot out a web, you'll feel a little rumble in the DualSense controller, and then as you swing, the trigger tightens as Miles' reaches the end of the swing. Miles also has a wider variety of tricks he can use while web swinging to earn experience points. Many of these moves were inspired by the skydiving techniques mentioned by Ham.

In one open-world exploration sequence Insomniac showed us, Miles brings up his phone to look over his activities. Several are available to him in this instance. Visible on the screen are four activities: Looters, My Car's Gone, Can't Find My Pigeons, and Ice Breaking My Crane. Each of these tasks shows the distance that Miles needs to travel to reach them, and also the reward, which just happens to be crafting tech parts for mods. If the player hits L1 on this phone screen, they will highlight potential crimes that can be tackled within the area. New York is once again broken up into districts; each carries a list of things that the player can complete to reach 100 percent. Some of the crimes from the first game return, but Insomniac has also dreamed up new ones that tie into both the story and Miles' lore.

One of Peter's stranger side activities had him return to Doctor Octavius' lab to conduct science experiments. From a narrative perspective, these moments helped establish Peter as a character outside of the mask. On the gameplay front, they provided pace-changing distractions for the player in the form of minigames. For this sequel, Insomniac didn't want the player looking into microscopes or even moving away from the world. All of the side activities unfold through normal gameplay. In one

THE ENHANCED EDITION AND BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY

Insomniac has gone back and remastered the first Spider-Man game for PlayStation 5, but it isn't available to purchase as a standalone release. This edition delivers three new suits, an enhanced photo mode, and even more trophies to earn. On the technical side, it has "near-instant loading," many updated art assets, characters with more detail, and it uses the PlayStation 5's 3D audio and DualSense haptic feedback. It also offers an optional performance boost for 60 frames per second.

Spider-Man: Remastered is included as a part of the Spider-Man: Miles Morales Ultimate Edition. If you purchased the PlayStation 4 version of Miles Morales, you can play it on PlayStation 5 for no extra cost. If you do this and want to play Spider-Man: Remastered, you need to pay $20 for the upgrade. For those of you who already have Spider-Man on PlayStation 4 and don't care about the enhanced edition, that version is backwards compatible and can be played just like you remember it.

example that gives us a hint of what we can expect, Spider-Man runs across a mechanical door that can't be opened because the power is out. After some sleuthing, he realizes a cable running from a generator to the door is severed. Miles reconnects the cable with a long strand of webbing stretching to both exposed ends, and then applies a Venom Punch to the generator. A jolt of yellow energy runs along the repaired wire and webbing to the door.

All missions, whether they are critical path or on the side, deliver experience points that can eventually level Miles up. "Another big push with the open world was making sure there were meaningful rewards, completing all these different activities, you tend to unlock a new suit, which is always awesome," Christian says.

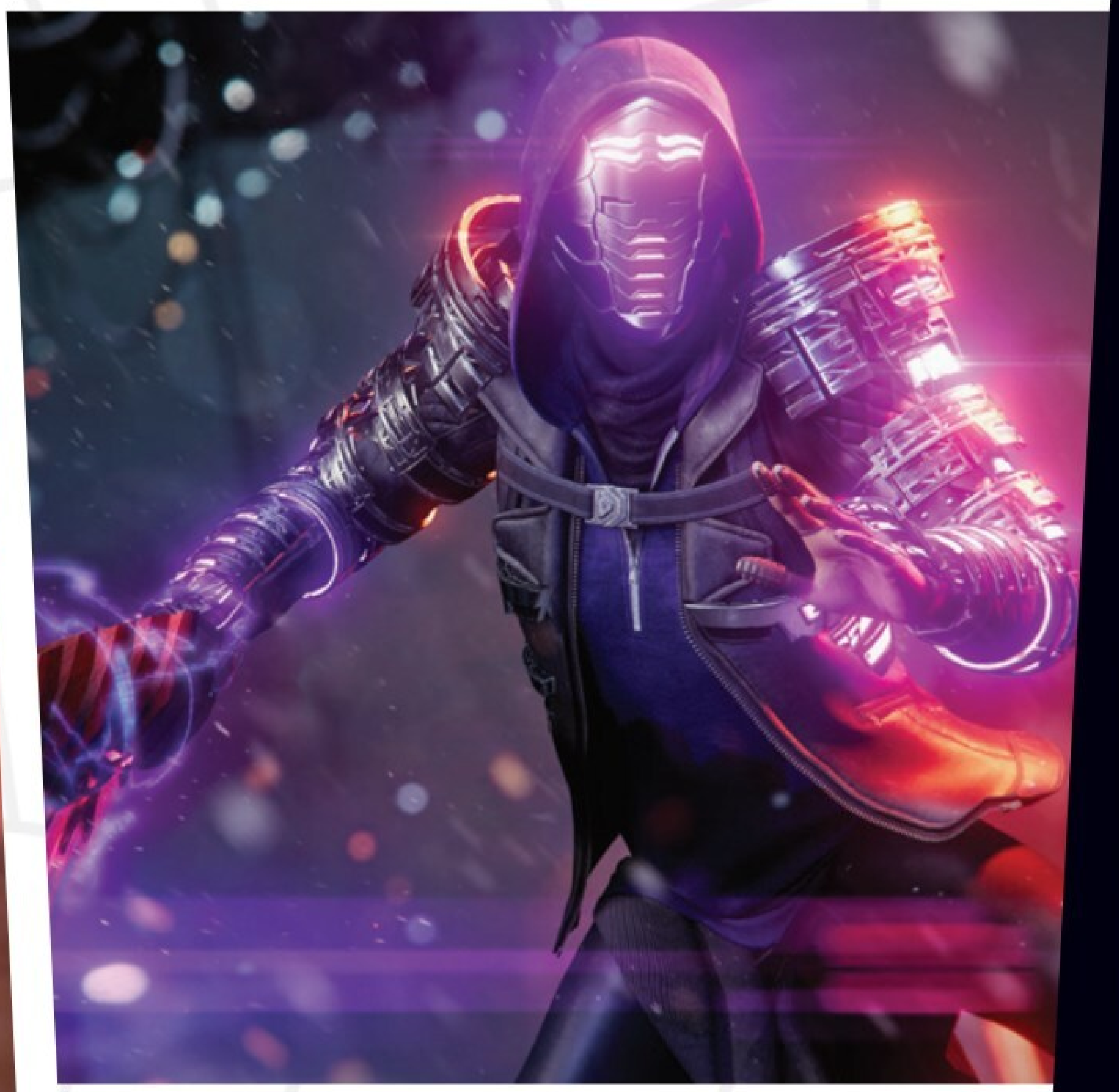
One such suit involves a third Spider-Man character. Yes, you read that right. A mission takes Miles to a small convenience store where he finds a distressed owner who was just robbed. The perps even took his cat, who happens to be named Spider-Man. The shop owner doesn't have much faith in Miles, but gives him a shot at saving his buddy. He tells Miles he saw the robbers enter a power station. Miles swings off, enters the station, battles the bad guys, and then is tasked to get his hands on the cat. The latter activity proves to be a little more difficult, as the cat just ran along some pipes and jumped into an elevator shaft. Miles gives chase, and after a battle with more foes, rescues the feline that is carefully placed in a backpack that Miles ends up wearing. On the web swing back to the shop, the cat pokes its head out of the backpack, and appears to be breathing in the wonder of the city. The cat is reunited with the owner, and also secretly becomes Miles' sidekick.

The cat is a part of one of the suits that the player unlocks, and Insomniac spared no details in making it awesome – the fuzzy companion is wearing a Spider-Man mask over the top part of his head. That's not all; when Miles performs a finisher, the cat leaps out of the backpack, bares its fangs, and slashes at the enemy with a furious claw strike. It's a goofy visual, but also a fantastic reward for completing side activities.

PHOTO MODE

It's not officially called Photo Mode 2.0, but it sounds like it could be given the number of improvements. Players can now fully customize the lighting. You can move and place up to three lights to give your shot the ideal setting for what you want to achieve. Miles has a slew of new selfie poses, and Insomniac added a bunch of new stickers, frames, and "other little things."

RIO MORALES



A WHOLE LOT OF HEART

Echoing the narrative flow of the first game, Insomniac's writers says this story will have plenty of slow moments that give us introspective looks at many of the characters close to Miles. In many of these sequences, the Spider-Man suit won't be worn, and we'll see Miles wandering around Harlem, getting to know his new neighborhood.

In one such scene, nightfall hits, and Miles returns home, acrobatically descending a fire escape to reach his bedroom window. He sneaks in, throws some clothing on over his suit, and then bolts out the front door to meet Ganke on the street. Miles playfully throws a snowball at his friend, who isn't as amused. The player has control of Miles as they walk down the street into a pop-up street fair. People are everywhere, enjoying each other's company, purchasing food from various tents, and are dancing to the music. The atmosphere is festive, and no details are spared in the visuals, making even a slow sequence like this look jaw-droppingly beautiful.

Miles is particularly keen on the music he hears. His father was big into records, and Miles has followed in his footsteps, becoming a bit of a beat maker. He tells Ganke he wants to get back into mixing. One of the game's collectibles is related to music. Insomniac wouldn't go into specifics, but did say it involves sampling music. As for the soundtrack itself, players will hear a mix of licensed and original songs coming from such talents as Jaden Smith, Kid Cudi, and Boi-1da. Horton calls the score "orchestral synth hop," as it blends all of those styles.

As Miles continues exploring, he again shows interest in another giant mural. This one is an illustration of a woman with dangling hoop earrings. Miles confronts the artist, who we learn is named Hailey. She communicates with him through American Sign Language. This isn't the only time we see Hailey in our demo. She seems to be around a lot, and there's a clear attraction between Miles and her. Horton wouldn't go into any more details, and instead urged us to play the game to find out more about her.

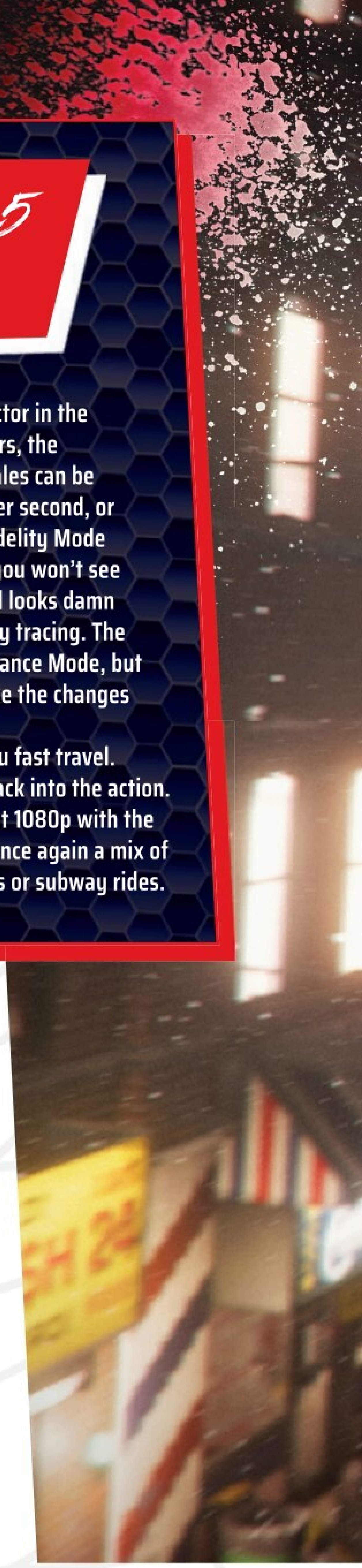
After wandering the streets for a bit, Miles runs into his mom, who is about to hold a rally for her run at office. The rally obviously makes Miles a little uneasy given what happened at the last one he attended, when his father was being honored. During a conversation, we hear Miles speak a little Spanish with his mother. Insomniac says they put great care into the different languages and representation of cultures. Jeter says that he took numerous coaching sessions to get a true Nuyorican Spanish dialogue down, which is specific to Puerto Ricans born and raised in New York.

In all of the footage we saw, numerous characters come forward as focuses in this story, and without revealing specifics, Narcisse says Miles' uncle will be around too (whether not that's as the Prowler remains to be seen). Unlike the first game, you'll never see sequences unfold through anyone else's eyes. Miles is the only playable character.

THE PLAYSTATION 5 DIFFERENCE

Along with the gameplay augmentations that factor in the DualSense's haptic feedback and dynamic triggers, the PlayStation 5 version of Spider-Man: Miles Morales can be played in Performance Mode at 4K/60 frames per second, or in Fidelity Mode at 4K/30 frames per second. Fidelity Mode offers ray tracing and other visual effects that you won't see at the higher framerate. Performance Mode still looks damn good with screen-space reflections replacing ray tracing. The native (dynamic) resolution is lower in Performance Mode, but Insomniac's temporal-injection techniques make the changes hard to see.

The entire game is load-time free, even if you fast travel. There's just a momentary flash, and you are back into the action. The PlayStation 4 version runs at 30 FPS and at 1080p with the PS4 Pro version delivering 30/4K. Loading is once again a mix of screens with an image of Spider-Man with tips or subway rides.



THE JOURNEY BEGINS

From the moment Marvel Comics was founded in 1939, a fleet of talented artists and writers began telling superhuman stories that were about inclusion. Those stories continue to be told, even in games, whether it's the journey we just took with Kamala Khan in Marvel's Avengers or the one we are about to experience in Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales.

With Marvel's Spider-Man, Insomniac delivered a grand adventure that soared with grace within the densely populated streets of New York City. This sequel appears to be in lockstep with that game, hitting many of the same notes that made it as enthralling as it was heartwarming. Yes, I'm concerned it won't last nearly long enough, but Horton assures me the campaign is a "satisfying length" and plenty of depth awaits those who veer off of it. I can't wait to see what villains lurk in the shadows, what NuForm truly is, and above all else, I want to see just how powerful and confident Miles is at the end of his journey. ◆

Head on over to gameinformer.com/miles for a full month of Miles Morales coverage that includes exclusive videos

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Montreal

» RELEASE
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PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC),
November 12
(PS5)

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

by Joe Juba

The Assassin's Creed games are huge, in terms of both popularity and scope. Ubisoft's hit franchise uses a mixture of history and fiction to create immersive worlds, all supported by diverse gameplay and interlocking systems. Like its predecessors, the upcoming Assassin's Creed Valhalla is ambitious; it is an exciting dive into the lives of the Vikings, defining the iconic historical figures through war, peace, and exploration. That's a lot of ground to cover, so we spoke to producer Julien Laferrière and narrative director Darby McDevitt to break down this massive experience and set the stage for Valhalla's release.

Ravensthorpe

The Assassin's Creed series has given players a place to call home in the past, like Monteriggioni in ACII and the homestead in ACIII. Valhalla goes above and beyond those efforts with Ravensthorpe, the settlement that acts as Eivor's base of operations. This is where you initiate quests, talk to your fellow Vikings, and build new structures (like a blacksmith) to enhance your capabilities. Ravensthorpe begins as a small village, but as Eivor gains resources and friends, you expand your settlement and your influence.

"The settlement growth is tied to the pacification of England," McDevitt says. "As you go out and come back and get alliances – and as the settlement grows – your reputation grows and people want to meet you. It's funny, because the front half of the game, you're going out and seeking alliances yourself. In the back half, because you have a reputation, more people are coming to you, saying 'Hey, I heard you're great. I'll give you an alliance if you help me with this massive problem.'"

Shedding the Stereotype

Players control Eivor, a Viking hero who can be either male or female. After a prologue set in Norway, Eivor's clan leaves their homeland to settle in England. Though Vikings are often remembered for raiding and looting, Valhalla aims to go beyond the mainstream stereotype and examine the more human stories behind the Vikings' expansion.

"Vikings were generally known as antagonists to everyone else, but there's a romance to them too, with the hindsight of history – just like pirates," McDevitt says. "The story we wanted to tell is: Why did a huge group of Norse people leave Norway and go settle all over the world? They found Iceland, Greenland, they settled the Faroe Islands, Ireland, England, Normandy – all these places. It wasn't just to rob from them. It was to settle and stay there, because they were running out of space and resources."

"In popular culture, you think about this bearded guy with horns on a drakar, just raiding and putting fire to everything he can see," Laferrière says. "This is really a cliché that we wanted to steer away from … Vikings were raiders, yes. Very famous warriors as well. But they were also settlers and explorers."

The Viking Flower

If you were to draw your path through the story in previous Assassin's Creed installments, it would probably be a wavy line; you gradually move toward your goal, but you stray off-course for sidequests and other detours. The team thinks of Valhalla's story structure as a flower; every quest starts and ends at the settlement, but loops out like a petal as Eivor explores new lands and seeks alliances.

"Everything starts at the heart of the game, which is the settlement," Laferrière says. "You pledge to a given quest arc, you do that quest arc. Through that series of stories you venture into a territory of the game, meet some interesting characters, and then you come back to your settlement." This unique approach gives the narrative an episodic feeling, since it is more about conveying the Viking fantasy than killing an archrival or chasing an Isu artifact.

"There's not a hard plot driving you through," McDevitt says. "There's this series of episodes that all touch on the themes of leadership, honor, reputation, shame, betrayal. And then tucked into that is this more personal story of Eivor and prophecy. That story of prophecy is going to be more familiar as a Western story with a three-act structure, but it's going to be threaded into this much bigger episodic story that feels more like a Norse saga."

That isn't to say that the narrative is unfocused. Like Odyssey, Valhalla essentially gives players three arcs to pursue. One is focused on Eivor personally, one is about the clan's expansion, and the third involves the conflict between the Assassins and Templars – or the Hidden Ones and the Order of the Ancients, as they are known during Valhalla's time period. Unlike Odyssey, these three plots converge eventually, rather than end independently. "There's a certain point – a big point in the middle – where you can follow each story individually," McDevitt says. "But they also will close in a specific order to give a different sense of conclusion."

The Hit List

Eivor isn't the only Viking hero. Sigurd is Eivor's brother, the son of King Styrbjorn by blood (Eivor is adopted, but no less part of the family) and the clan's official leader in England. When Sigurd returns home after a few years away, he is accompanied by some Hidden Ones, and this is how Eivor gets wrapped up in a conflict against the Order of the Ancients. You have a full menu (inspired by the one in Odyssey) that lists your targets from the order; taking them out helps you secure alliances in new areas, but Eivor can reap those benefits without being ideologically committed to the cause. "It's not as black and white as, 'I'm 100-percent enemies with the Order of the Ancients, and 100-percent friends with the Hidden Ones,'" McDevitt says. "It's a little more juicy than that."

Terror on the Water

You can't be a Viking raider without raiding, and you can't raid without a ship. Valhalla puts Eivor in command of a ship and crew, allowing you to attack English settlements and gain resources. But formal raids aren't the only time you can get some help from your Viking companions. "We came up with 'raid anywhere,' which is basically any sort of military location along the shores," Laferrière says. "Not necessarily a 'raid,' per se, but you're able to use your crew to help you out in this context."

Accomodating Combat

Versatility is a driving force behind Valhalla's brutal combat. With dual-wielding and a variety of weapons like axes, bows, and the iconic hidden blade, you can pursue a fighting style that feels right for you. Plus, different abilities attached to specific pieces of gear give you even more options. For example, you might have an armor set that increases your damage output if you're low on health, which is a high-risk approach that can result in spectacular triumph or terrible defeat. Or maybe you'd rather play it safe and strike from the shadows. "If you want to play a badass Viking who likes to fight with a two-handed axe, the game will support that," Laferrière says. "If you want to play an assassin oriented around stealth, the game will allow you to do that … it's a game that caters to a lot of different playstyles."

The Modern-Day Story

Assassin's Creed Origins introduced a new modern-day story arc starring Layla Hassan, and Odyssey continued Layla's quest. Valhalla is the concluding chapter of that tale. Like previous entries, some sequences have players controlling Layla outside of the Animus – but your interactions with the modern-day arc now go beyond those interludes.

"The amount of time you spend in the present day would be equivalent to [Origins and Odyssey], but with the added provision that there are these Animus anomalies in the simulation layer," McDevitt says. "You'll find quite a lot of them; when you find them as Eivor and touch them, the whole simulation freezes and then Layla drops the disguise. She becomes Layla in the simulation, and then you have dialogue with your present-day characters there, and you have to solve puzzles, and things like that. And they are very cool, and the rewards for them are mind-blowing. So, we found a way so you don't have to get out of the Animus at all times to do the present-day; sometimes the present day happens in the Animus."

Lessons From Odyssey

Before Valhalla, Ubisoft Montreal's last Assassin's Creed game was Origins. However, with Odyssey releasing in 2018, the team was also able to learn from that installment during Valhalla's development. This includes integrating some of Odyssey's successful innovations, like how players use skills in combat. "A good example of something Odyssey brought is all the abilities you can equip," Laferrière says. "That's a super-cool thing we wanted to bring back with our own flavor and our own twist in Valhalla."

Valhalla is also able to improve on areas where Odyssey faced some criticism. For example, Odyssey had a lot of cool legendary weapons and armor, but they could get buried amid an abundance of not-so-cool loot. "We wanted to transition from an economy that is loot-based to something more collection-based," Laferrière says. "Vikings were taking good care of their weapons and gear, sometimes passing them down generations, so that's something that is historically accurate. But the reason we did it isn't only because of history. It's mostly because of player behavior. We know that when players find a good piece of loot, they like to stick with it and upgrade it."

Next-Gen Advantages

Even though Valhalla is releasing on current- and next-gen consoles, the content of the game remains the same no matter what system you play on. The big difference between the versions is technical, with the new generation offering improved visuals and performance. "I'm playing the game on the test kits that we have, and it's definitely a cool and smooth experience," Laferrière says. "I'm amazed by what we can get. Just think about your go-to AC game and think about the amount of loading that we have, and how much improving that can help. For example, when you use the raven in [Valhalla]. Traditionally, if the raven or eagle would go too far, you would have this loading. Now, in a normal use of your raven, you immediately go back to your character … Because next-gen has better loading capacities and so on, I feel that the immersion of the game will just be better." ◈

HOW TO PREPARE

Assassin's Creed Vallhalla is almost out – but you still have some time to get into the Viking mood before its November 10 release. If you want a firm foundation in Norse culture and history before jumping in, here are five options recommended by Darby McDevitt, Valhalla's narrative director.

Egil's Saga

A long tale chronicling the history and adventures of an Icelandic farmer's family, and an excellent example of the saga storytelling format.

The Tale of Thorstein Staff-struck

One of the best (and shortest) stories to illustrate Norse views on honor, reputation, and shame.

Saga of the Völsungs

Great if you want Norse stories with fantastical elements like magic, trolls, shapeshifters, and appearances from Odin.

The Last Kingdom

The first season of this British television series is set in the same time period as Assassin's Creed Valhalla.

The Poetic Edda

A collection of poems that essentially form the sum total of Norse mythology.

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Quebec

» RELEASE
December 3

Taking Flight

How Immortals Fenyx Rising evolved from Gods and Monsters

by Kimberley Wallace

During the course of development, anything can happen. Developers are constantly listening to feedback, making revisions, and doing playtests to ensure the best experience possible. Immortals Fenyx Rising, the game formerly known as Gods and Monsters, is no different, but its stunning transformation when shown at a recent Ubisoft showcase excited many. In just a year since its reveal, Ubisoft Quebec has rethought the tone, hero, and universe. It still remains a game steeped in Greek mythology, where you come face-to-face with larger-than-life creatures and explore a vast landscape filled to the brim with great rewards. To learn more about how the project has grown, we chatted with the development team and spent two hours exploring the game to see everything in action.

REFINING ITS VISION

At the end of 2019, director Scott Phillips was on a mission to get feedback about the current state of the game. "I wanted everyone on the team to play the game," he recalls. "We had I think something like 700 developers play the game at that time. We got people around the world. We got feedback everywhere. We evaluated all that and looked at, 'Okay, when are we coming out? What do we have time to do? What can we accomplish with this game? Where can we push or either double down on things that are working well, or improve and change things that may not be working as well?'"

The art style was the first target for improvement. Phillips said the goal was to increase the texture density and go in a more stylized direction. Art director Thierry Dansereau sees the change in style as a natural evolution that came together once the team got a time extension, with the release date being pushed from February. "When we started making Immortals Fenyx Rising [after] Assassin's Creed Odyssey, we jumped at the occasion to try to do something that would put us out of our comfort zone, because we were used to photorealistic games. We wanted to try to challenge ourselves by creating something we're not used to, and do something different from what you'd normally see from Ubisoft. I would say that it was a big learning curve for us as we learned to stylize, to work in a less realistic way and more on the fantasy side by using the Greek mythology and fully exploiting it in a way where, from a visual point of view, we could maybe please a wider audience."

Another area that was rethought was the story and its narrator. Previously, famous Ancient Greek poet Homer took this role, but now Zeus and Prometheus banter throughout, commenting on your progress. It adds a more humorous, lighthearted bent, with the pair having colorful personalities and breaking the fourth wall. "We felt like Homer didn't necessarily have a stake in the story; he was just sort of retelling a story to the player or to the audience," Phillips explains. "We felt like we needed the narrators to have a connection to the story and to have stakes within the story, and so we wanted to fully integrate Zeus and Prometheus. They collide together with the story that they're telling at the end with a really fun conclusion to the game when we wrap everything all together. We felt like that was a really strong improvement to do on the narrative."

The team then reevaluated its gameplay and the challenge it offered. Beyond just polish, more depth was added to the enemies, expanding their capabilities and movesets. "We added more legendary enemies, we added more world bosses, and made sure that they had enough depth to them to really engage the player," Phillips says. "And we expanded on the player skills and abilities, adding more options and more customization, more choices, and more scope to pretty much everything."

MEET FENYX

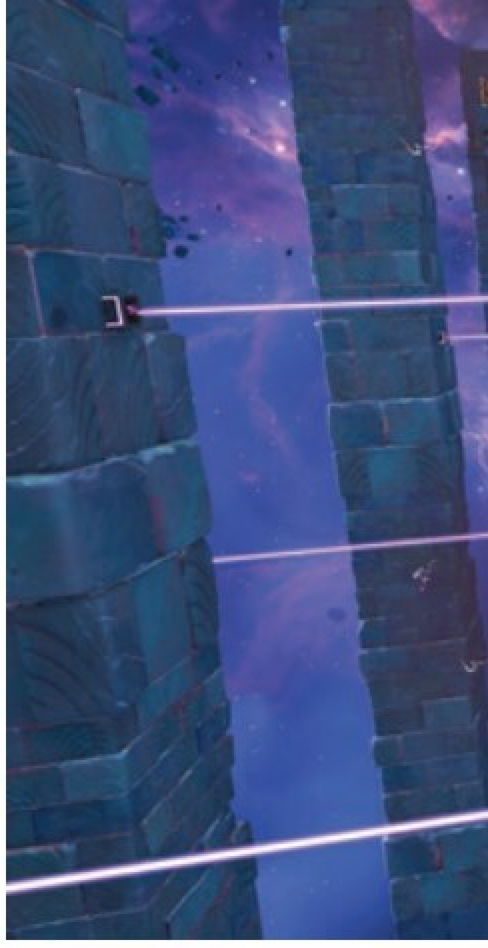
The star of the adventure is customizable character Fenyx, who you can style in various ways through the character creator, selecting a gender, voice, skin color, hairstyle, and more. Fenyx is the Greek gods' only hope against the revenge-hungry antagonist Typhon, who has some pent-up rage from Zeus imprisoning him under a mountain. Typhon's first act is releasing vicious monsters and corruption throughout the land. A prophecy says Fenyx will save the gods, and so our hero will work to earn their blessings and legendary weapons to bring Typhon down.

Fenyx has their own story you'll uncover throughout your journey. "[Fenyx] is definitely more than just an avatar, and their story as a character is going to be very important for the story of the game," says associate game director Julien Galloudec. "I can't say too much about that, because it's actually a key point of what you're going to discover playing the game."

Galloudec was kind enough to provide some background information about where Fenyx is at when Immortals begins. As a shield-bearer in the Greek army, Fenyx has yet to see battle and is growing more frustrated by the day. "Their big brother is a very famous warrior in the Greek army, so they're very eager to prove themselves and impress their brother." Fenyx is also a consummate storyteller, using the gods and mythology for material. "Fenyx doesn't really believe in those stories, but loves the epicness of those stories," he says.

After a trip out to sea leads to everyone getting shipwrecked on a mysterious island, Fenyx finally has the opportunity to step off the sidelines and into their own epic adventure. When awakening, our hero realizes everyone has turned to stone, forcing Fenyx to search for answers while also discovering a greater purpose awaits.

On the ground and in the air, Fenyx's journey is full of great dangers



STEPPING INTO A VIBRANT OPEN WORLD

Open worlds are core to the Ubisoft formula, so its developers have learned quite a bit about what draws people in and keeps them exploring. Immortals Fenyx Rising is no different, taking things you love from Ubisoft's other franchises, particularly Assassin's Creed, and bringing its own twist with its Greek-mythology-infused backdrop. During your time, you'll fight iconic creatures such as cyclops, gorgon, and minotaur and visit seven distinct regions that take inspiration from different Greek gods and goddesses, such as the lush landscapes of Aphrodite's plains and the mechanical world of Hephaistos' forge. I explored the latter when I went hands-on with the game. The Forgelands was inspired by fire and volcanoes, which is fitting considering it's the home to the god of blacksmiths.

Similar to the Assassin's Creed series, you have a companion bird, Phosphor, whose far-sight allows you to zoom out and scout for treasure, points of interest, and challenges to mark on the map. Vaults of Tartaros, obstacle-ridden areas that require you to pull out a slew of your different abilities, like platforming over dangerous obstacles or using your bow and arrow to activate switches, dot the map.

In addition to vaults, you can hunt down myth challenges to earn extra rewards, like new equipment or crafting materials for potions. For instance, a navigation challenge might require you to quickly reach an area without touching the ground, while a constellation challenge has you searching for pieces to recreate a pattern. Exploring the world, I always felt there was something to do and collect, and most importantly, it held that exciting possibility of finding that next big armor upgrade around every corner.

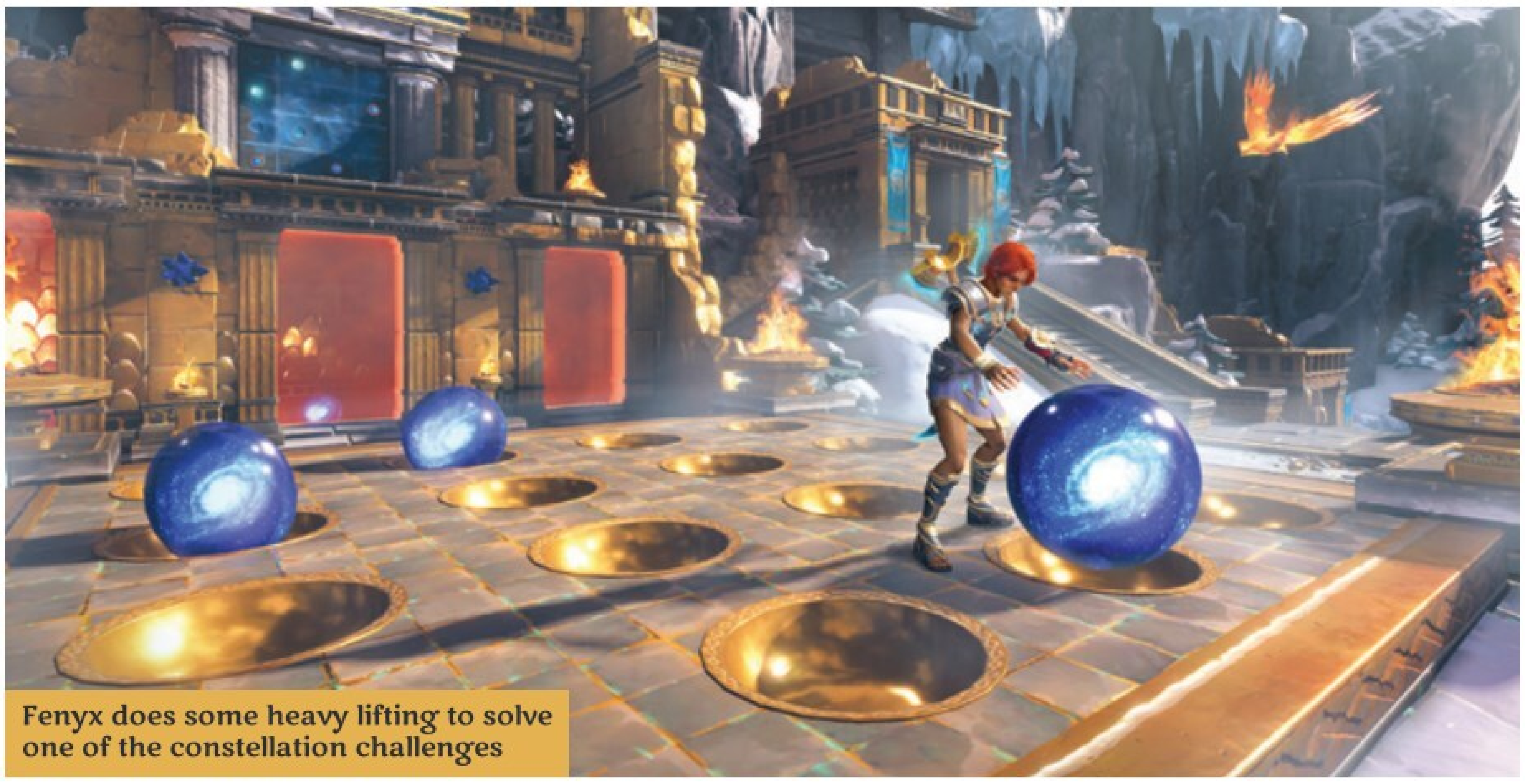
The world is big, and there's no shortage of ways to explore. First off, you have the Wings of Daedalus that give you the power to fly in the air and avoid combat, but the stamina meter prevents you from relying completely on this tactic for traversal. You can also find various mounts that allow you to swiftly bypass enemies, but you'll also need to occasionally slow down to restore their stamina. Lastly, verticality is a big part of this world, and you'll often find yourself climbing your way to destinations. "Stamina is so important to our exploration of the world," Phillips says. "We wanted it to be something that you're not certain about. It's more of an adventure, you're not quite sure if you're going to make it someplace. You need to think about how you're going to get there and the things you're going to encounter along the way. We wanted you to think of it as an adventure in itself."

What I found most interesting was how easy it was to swap between the main methods of traversal. I would have my mount sprint to a cliff and use my wings to launch myself in the air until I found a ledge for climbing. It all happens very seamlessly and feels natural; meaning getting around never feels like a chore. However, for those wondering, you can unlock fast-travel points to shorten your trips.

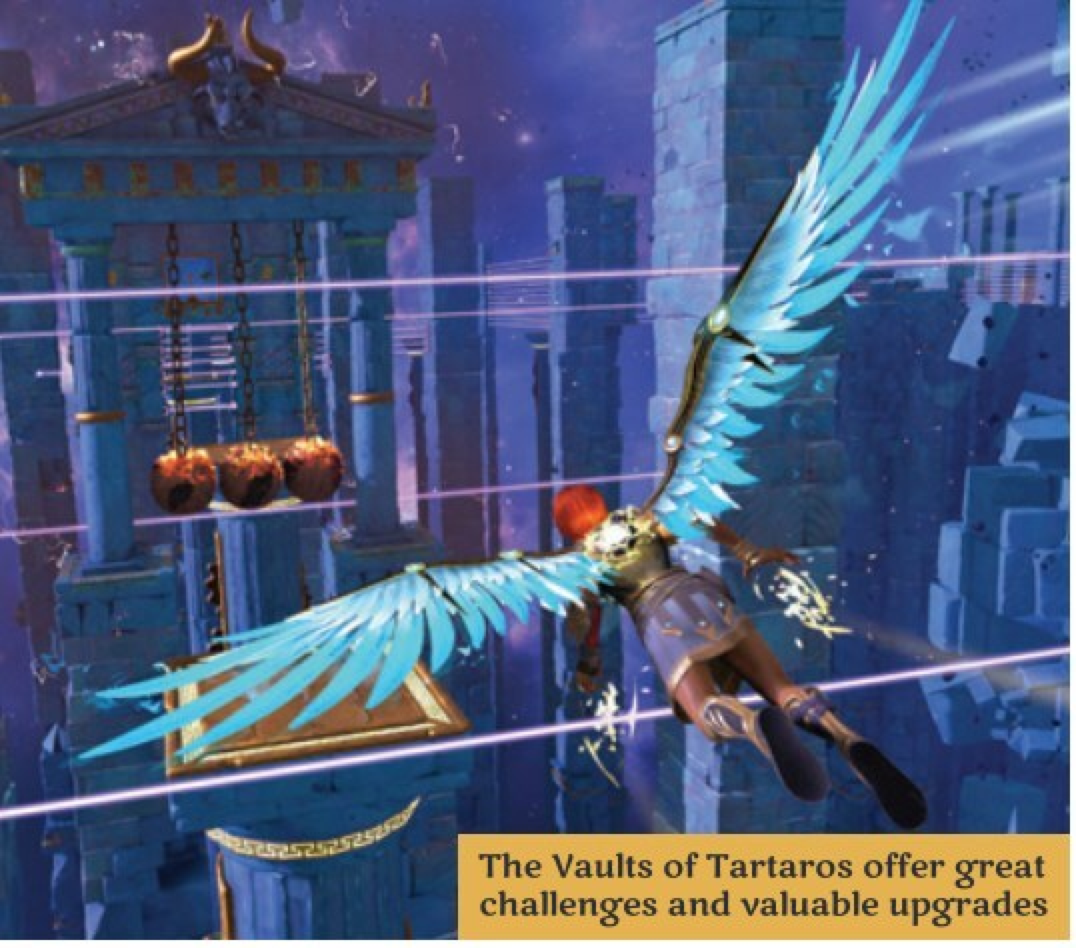
The Assassin's Creed Odyssey Influence

The same studio behind Assassin's Creed Odyssey is creating Immortals Fenyx Rising, and the similarities aren't hard to spot. In fact, the team's work on Odyssey provided a great deal of inspiration and helped lay the groundwork. "A lot of the education that we had about Ancient Greece and the mythology fed into the concepts quite a bit," says director Scott Phillips. "Because once we knew the gods that we wanted to have in the game and to be centerpieces, we knew we wanted to build regions around them. And so, we had a good base of knowledge of what those things could be or should be."

While Phillips certainly thinks it helped conceptually, he said due to the mechanics and different style of the world, that's where its impact ends. The goal was to go all-in on the fictional setting, a welcome break from trying to depict real-world settings in the Assassin's Creed series. "Here, it was more of a Disney World approach of taking a concept or an idea of the god and what they're about and then putting that into a three-dimensional world, a place that you explore," he says. "It was more of, 'Okay, how do we tell the story of this god, who they are, and what their history has been in what we build in the world and what puzzles we place in regions?' So rather than trying to recreate an authentic place, we tried to recreate more of a narrative about that character within their region."



Fenyx does some heavy lifting to solve one of the constellation challenges


The Vaults of Tartaros offer great challenges and valuable upgrades

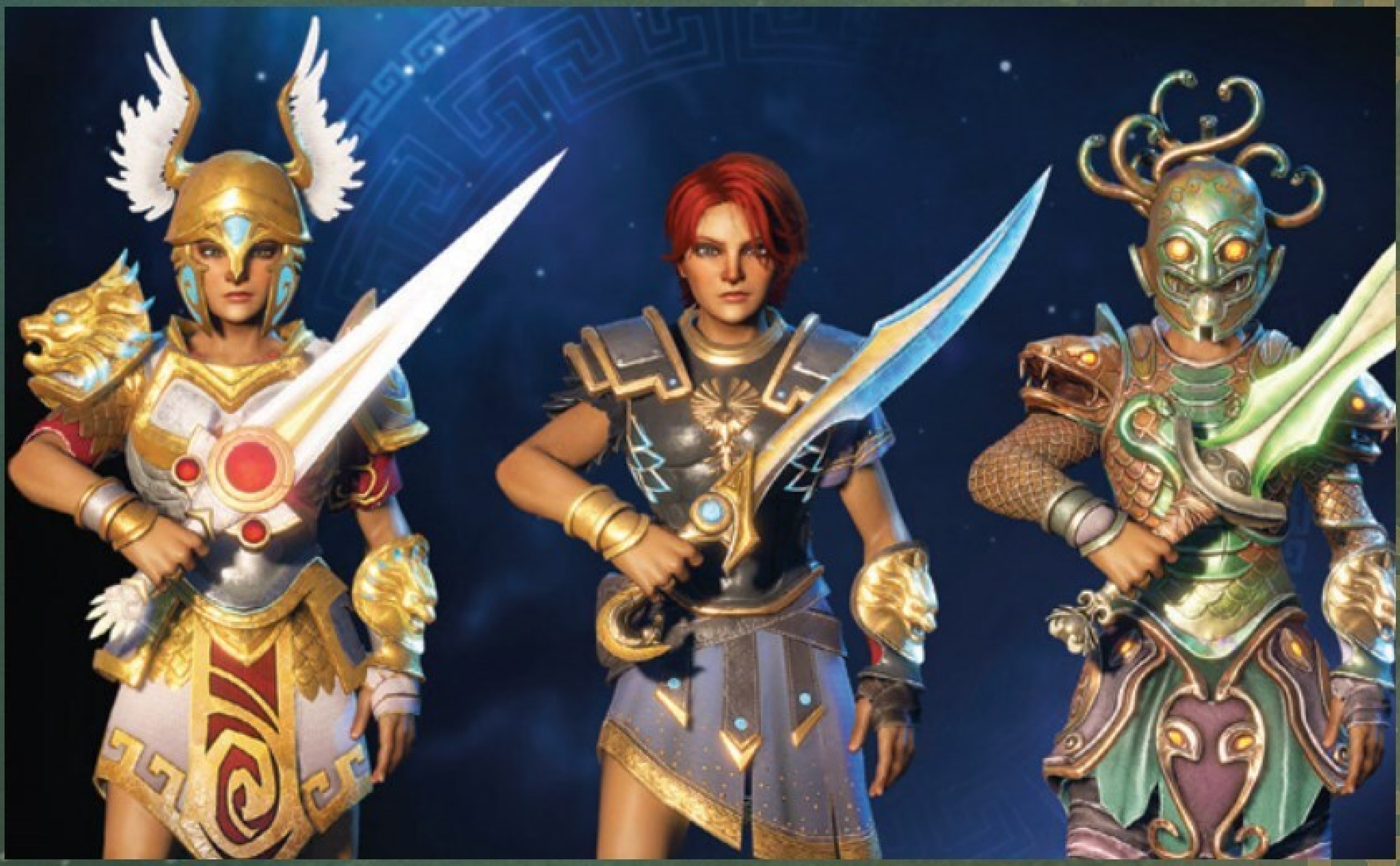
All About Customization

If you're someone always on the lookout for your next big shiny, Immortals is for you, especially in terms of your equipment. Every set of armor and weapon you pick up is reflected visually on your character, and one of the biggest draws is unlocking something better and more visually stunning for Fenyx. All gear has its own stats and abilities alongside being able to customize colors and variations of it. "It's part of the exploration loop where you get to find a new kind of armor, and sometimes it is going to be a new skin for that armor, and you can mix and match your elements, your armor, but also the wings," says associate director Julien Galloudec. "So you're going to find different types of Wings of Daedalus in the world. And basically, each time we added something on the character, we made sure that you can customize it."

Even your bird companion, Phosphor, gets in on the customization action. "With Phosphor, each of the skins has a perk that's aligned with the abilities that Phosphor can help you out with in combat, so you can sort of customize and get different effects and different results out of when he does his attacks or certain bonuses to things that that Phosphor will help you with," says director Scott Phillips.

In my demo, the gear was plentiful and I enjoyed swapping attire and seeing it reflected on Fenyx. While you'll find a lot of cool discoveries in your playthrough, you won't be constantly changing gear, as the team wanted to have pieces be more meaningful and important to you. "We wanted you to have a reasonable set of multiple things that you upgrade and keep with you throughout the game that are iconic, unique, and always special – that stand out in their gameplay impacts and how useful they are to you," Phillips says. "So, you're not churning through gear as much as you're investing and making that gear feel meaningful to you and to your playstyle throughout the entire session."

And don't worry, Phillips confirmed it was carrying over transmogrification, which allows you to keep the visual customization alongside the perk you want.



A MIX OF TENSE ACTION COMBAT AND PATIENT PUZZLE-SOLVING

When you're fighting against mythical baddies, you want to feel like you have the power to match them. Ubisoft didn't hold back here, as you engage in fast and acrobatic combat that is as over-the-top as the enemies you face. You have your light and strong attacks to do damage up close with your sword and axe weapons, but you also have a bow and arrow for ranged attacks and to shoot down airborne enemies.

The most exciting part of Fenyx's arsenal is their powers from the gods and how you experiment with them to unleash deadly combos. You can do everything from summon your bird Phosphor to dive bomb the enemy and distract it, swing Hephaistos' giant hammer for a huge AOE attack, or use Ares' deadly spears to thrust enemies in the air. However, you can't just blindly spam your special attacks; you have a stamina gauge to consider in battle, which you charge up by performing sword attacks, think AC: Odyssey's adrenaline meter. Also, if you execute a perfect dodge, time slows down briefly, allowing you to pummel the enemy. All your skills can be upgraded for additional combos and perks, allowing you to tailor it to your playstyle.

"With immortals Fenyx Rising we weren't tied to restrictions or lore like in Assassin's Creed, we were able to invest much more and go all-in on gods and these over the top powers and these giant creatures," Phillips says. "[There's] double jumping, gliding, and moving around the combat arena – very acrobatic fights with big explosions of effects and lots of powers. We really wanted to double down on that aspect of the gameplay."

The gameplay also gives you plenty of places to catch your breath and take a break from the chaotic action. Various obstacles present themselves in Fenyx's journey and you'll need to figure out ways to overcome them. "Puzzle-solving was important because we have a pretty intense experience in the fight and the traversal," Galloudec says. "We wanted something that can be a pace breaker, where you can be more focused and go at your own pace on something that is more challenging in logic or the observation of the environment. We made sure to have a lot of variety. So, we have puzzles that are going to challenge your dexterity, your memory, your manipulation of the environment."

For some examples of the puzzles I encountered in my hands-on, in a story quest, I had to discover how to restart a forge. This required throwing coal into the furnaces and then shooting my arrows through fire to light it. Most puzzles are simple like this, mainly involving moving objects to activate various switches, but some are more complex, requiring you to think carefully. In another one, I had deadly laser beams surrounding me and had to move a crate to block them, which seems easy in theory, but you need precision when placing the boxes and are constantly shuffling them around to new areas. The majority of these encounters feel reminiscent of Breath of the Wild's physics-based puzzles and your Magnesis ability to carry objects, almost to a fault.

Some puzzles are more tedious than fun; an item you need always seems to be on the opposite side of the room, or you're having to jump through hoops just to complete a simple task like finding the object you need to place. I got excited when I came across a creative puzzle in a vault where you had a huge rock that you hit with paddles like a pinball machine. I was delighted to have something that wasn't "move A to B," but then this rock moved like molasses, never picking up enough momentum to replicate the excitement of a pinball game. At the very least, you do get some pretty sweet treasure for completing the optional puzzles tied to challenges.

HOPING TO RISE

In just a few months, Immortals Fenyx Rising will launch, and it will be interesting to see how it charts its course. Ubisoft has created some of the best open-world experiences of the last generation, but it's also struggled to reinvent its formula. Immortals Fenyx Rising holds a fresh setting, incorporates puzzles to break up the action, and invites a new mindset when traversing its world. Let's not forget, you're fighting with powers lifted from Greek gods and visiting regions inspired by them. This could all point to a recipe for success, and we're hoping it soars high. ◆

Call Of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

The impending multiplayer offering

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(40-Player Online)

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Treyarch, Raven Studios

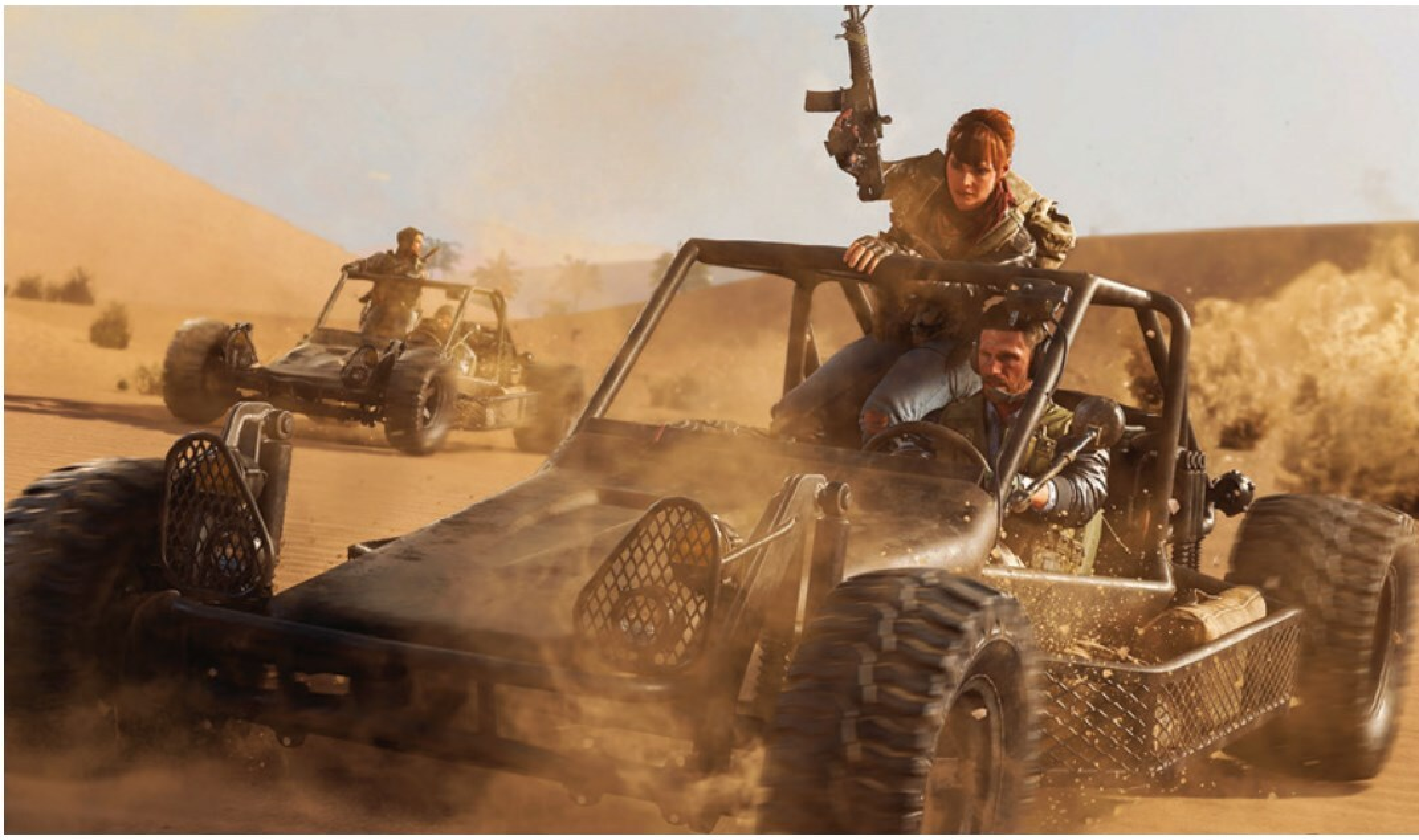
» Release
November 13

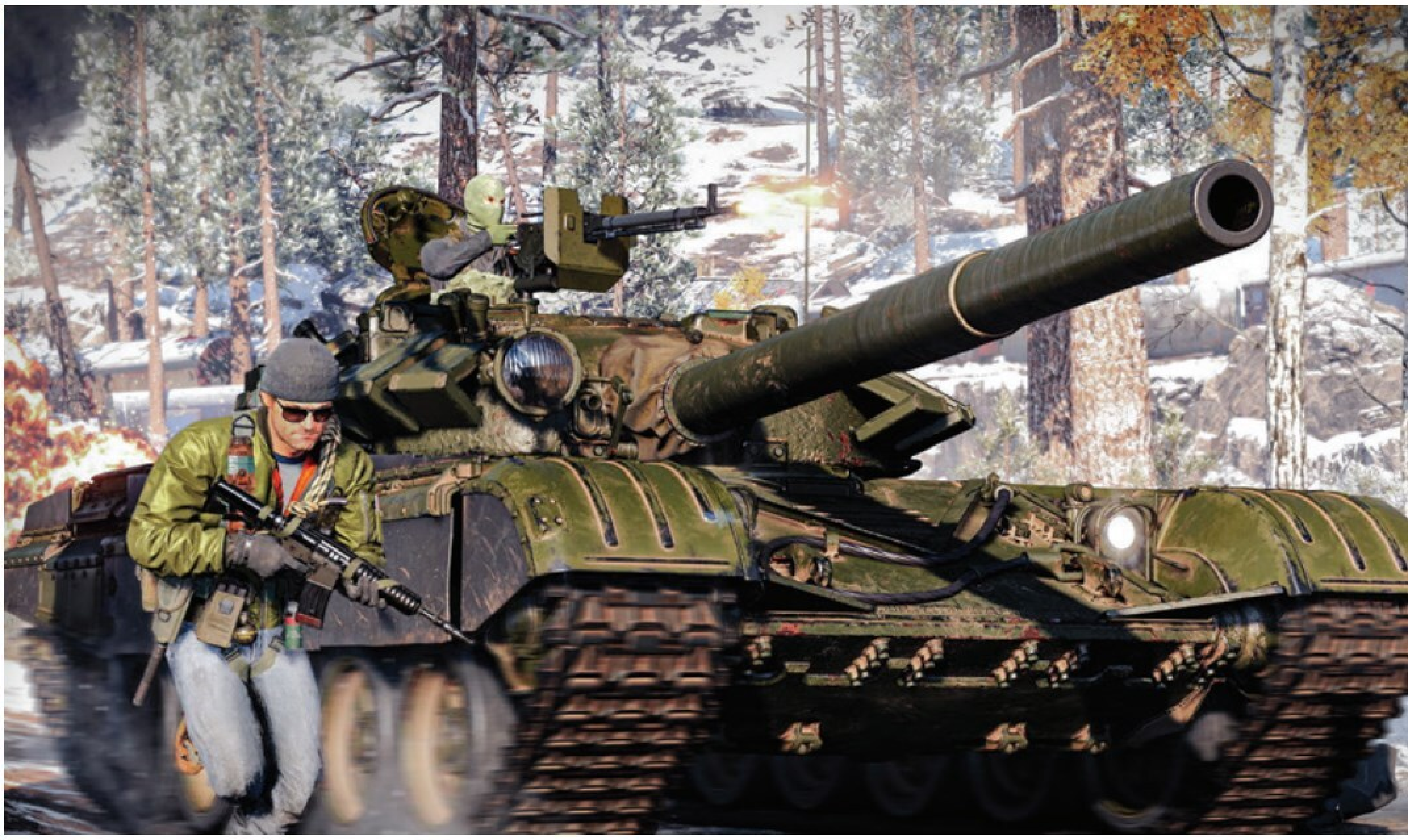
Call of Duty titles are massive, multi-headed hydras that contain big content packages to suit many playstyles. Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War is tackling the annual release with a campaign featuring multiple endings and Treyarch's psychological oddities, a traditional multiplayer suite of options that we're going to delve into here, and Zombies. We don't know much about Zombies yet, but it's one of Treyarch's specialties, so I'm hoping there's a few changes to its classic survival/puzzle formula. Warzone will continue to live on as the Call of Duty battle royale offering, infused by Cold War styling in various ways. If you're already invested in Warzone, no worries – all of your progression and unlocks are carrying over to whatever comes.

One of the biggest additions to the multiplayer suite this year is the 12v12 Combined Arms. This multiplayer mode gives players access to a wide variety of vehicles to use during battle in two categories, light transport and heavy war machines. You can zip around a map on a jet ski, a snowmobile, or a dirt bike to cap points fast or get the drop on enemies. Looking for a bigger blast? Shred opponents to pieces with the gunboat's turret or blow multiple enemies away with a tank. Of course, the deadly options come with drawbacks as well. They're large targets, slow to maneuver around obstacles, and can be blindsided easily. New weapon attachments also allow players to do massive damage to vehicles if you're tired of getting tanked.

Looking for a bit more controlled chaos in your Call of Duty? Forget the madness of Team Deathmatch, Kill Confirmed, or Hardpoint – your new game mode as a tactical strategist is VIP Escort. This 6v6 mode has one team escorting a player-controlled VIP player with a special loadout ideal for managing the escape to an extraction point. Instead of respawning, players are downed after being hit with enough damage. During the downed phase, an ally can bring them back up into the fight by spending some time to get them up, but that in turn puts them at great risk for an attack, and using downed players as bait is a standard tactic. If you don't get help in time when downed or the enemy continues to shoot you, you're done until the next round. VIP dies? Round over. Players looking for a more team-oriented experience with good communication are likely to gravitate to this mode.

How about something massive instead? Fireteam mode supports up





to 40 players, 10 teams of 4, with giant maps, multiple objectives, and plenty of vehicles. Fireteam is meant to be a full-scale war, where you have access to the full land/sea/air environments all in one experience. To help keep you where the action's happening on these large maps, you can respawn directly into a teammates vehicle, to a teammate that's not in combat, or by a standard parachute if none of your friends are in a good spot. Fireteam is designed to capitalize on tons of players, lots of space, and a massive complement of vehicles.

Scorestreaks are back over killstreaks, incentivizing playing objectives. This time around, scorestreaks are persistent, as your points will accrue from life to life and not expire on death. This allows players that normally couldn't get too many kills in a row to use some of the more elaborate special call-ins like choppers or strikes. However, don't worry too much if you're an old CoD pro that's used to mad slaying; you'll be rewarded with more points from accomplishing those chain kills so you can use more streak abilities. Scorestreak abilities have cooldowns as well to prevent true insanity from overtaking the fight.

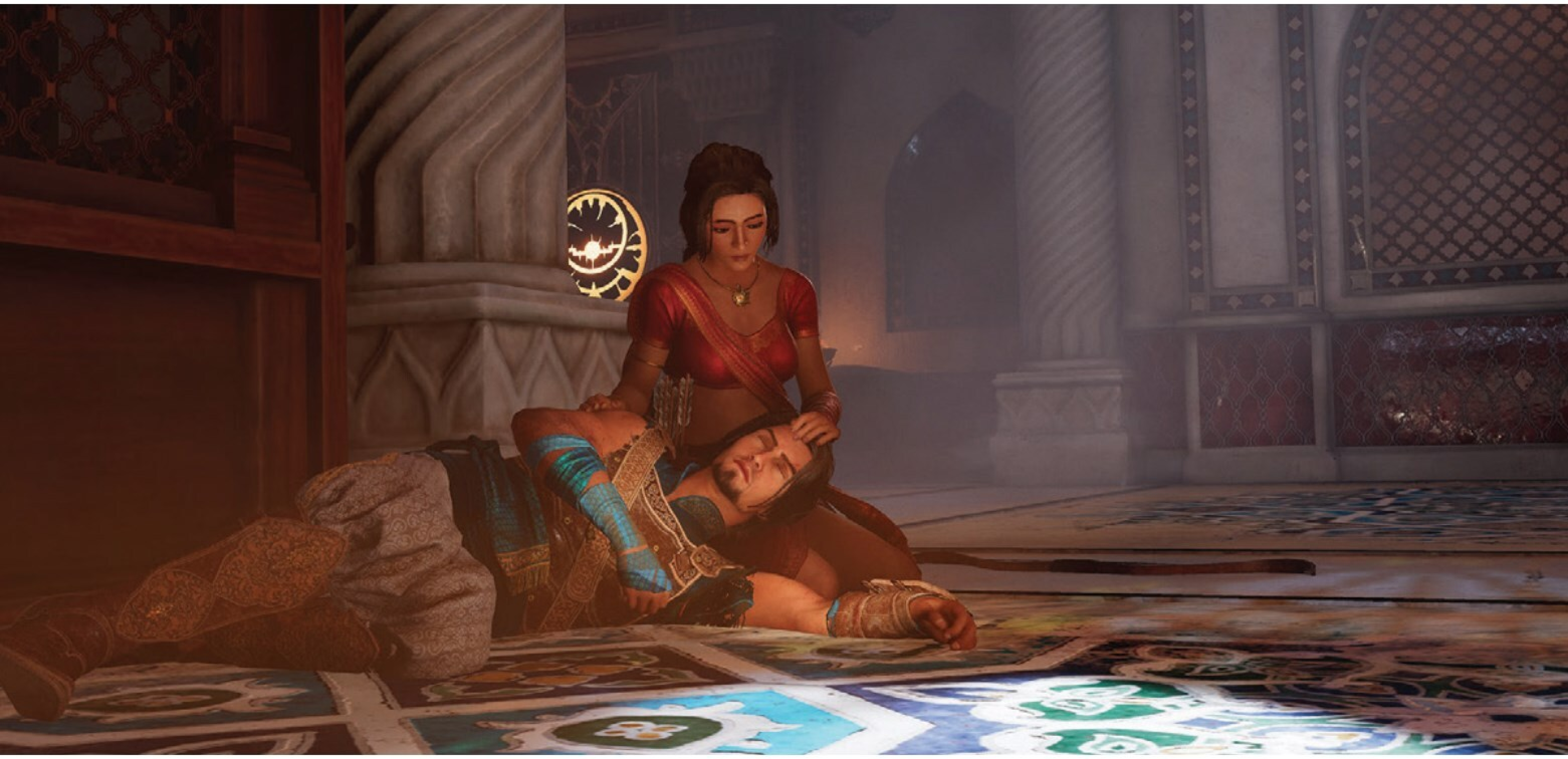
Weapon attachments are the name of the game, with over 50 choices for some weapons. Many attachments are tradeoffs, like sacrificing range for power. Via gunsmithing, you can modify weapons to play your way, from picking the perfect scope for the map to going ham with a massive magazine ready to hammer down a Hardpoint with suppressing fire. Unlimited sprinting keeps you mobile at all times, ready to slide (yes, sliding is here) around a corner and unload into foes. Life regeneration is back to the gold standard of Call of Duty; stop taking damage for a few ticks and you're back to top condition.

New maps take players to a variety of locations, including some tailored to take advantage of the vehicular focus. Fight in the ocean, in sandswept desert dunes, or in the frozen snow. If vehicles aren't your thing, plenty of other interesting cityscapes are on tap, including a neon-nightlife Miami and a luxurious Moscow center.

Traditional multiplayer is probably one of the hardest dials to turn with each Call of Duty entry. Do you change things too much? Not enough? Treyarch seems like it's going to have a strong offering this year on all fronts. We'll see how things ultimately shake out when Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War arrives on November 13. » **Daniel Tack**

Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time Remake

Standing the test of time



» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One X • PC

» **Style**
1- Player Action

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Pune and
Ubisoft Mumbai

» **Release**
January 21

In 2003, Ubisoft revived Jordan Mechner's classic Apple II platformer with a 3D action/platformer that blended parkour navigation with clever time-rewinding mechanics. Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time was a classic for a new age, but that title is now older than Mechner's original was when Sands of Time originally released. Ubisoft has decided to unearth this timeless classic and give modern gamers a chance to experience this magical journey again or for the first time.

"We all wanted to replay Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time ourselves," says Ubisoft Pune's game director Pierre-sylvain Gires. "The remake was made to play on that nostalgia for older players, but we also wanted to adapt the game for new players who didn't have the chance to play the original Sands of Time … It's a masterpiece. It's a game we all grew up with, and it has the perfect balance between combat, parkour, and puzzles."

Set in a fictional version of ninth-century Persia, the original Sands of Time told the story of a young prince's journey to save his land from a corrupting, magical sandstorm. After the Prince unwittingly releases the Sands of Time on the Sultan's Kingdom, these magical grains turn most of the city's population into undead-like monsters, so the Prince teams up with the daughter of the Maharaja and navigates this collapsing kingdom to restore balance to the world.

As the Prince explores his decaying palace, he discovers the dagger of time, a magical artifact that allows him to rewind time on a whim. This dagger becomes extremely useful during Sands of Time's journey, allowing players to rewind the action and restart combat encounters or retry tricky platforming sequences. With the remake, Ubisoft is remaining faithful to the original's story and gameplay, so there are no new areas or gameplay mechanics. However, Sands of Time's dated visuals are getting a needed refresh – which includes cinematics.

"Getting to go back and do motion capture and performance capture on this game was great," says actor Yuri Lowenthal, who reprises his role as the Prince. "That technology just didn't exist much then. That first Sands of Time was all key-animated. We rerecorded every single line and even found some lines in the script for the original Sands of Time that never made it into the game, so we made sure that some of those made it in just to mix it up a little bit."

Ubisoft isn't ready to comment on how this remake could affect the series going forward, but hopefully, it's the start of a new run for the franchise. At the same time, the developers were quick to point out that Sands of Time is Ubisoft's first full-scale remake, which could imply that we'll eventually see remakes of other Ubisoft games in the coming years. Until then, we'll have to content ourselves with this beloved gem. » **Ben Reeves**

Kingdom Hearts Melody Of Memory

Celebrating decades of memorable music

Kingdom Hearts' music has always been a magical part of the journey. With a rhythm/action game set to debut in November, Square Enix is finally revealing more information on what we can expect, and it already looks to be a special experience. Relive some of the series' most iconic moments by jamming to over 140 tracks from Sora's journey.

The main game mode is called "World Tour," which has you revisiting moments and destinations from all of the titles up through Kingdom Hearts III. In this mode, every world has a few tracks associated with it, and each track has three missions. Players receive stars by fulfilling particular requirements for each mission, and a certain number of stars is required to unlock gates, which allow players to access new areas.

World Tour is set immediately after the story of the Kingdom Hearts III DLC Re Mind and features its own story, starring Kairi as the narrator who reflects on everything that has happened up until this point. "What she does tell through her recollection is not just the experiences that she went through, but it's all the experiences that her allies and the party members had experienced throughout the story as well," says franchise director Tetsuya Nomura. "And once we go through the story of recollection and beyond that, we start to see a timeline that will connect to the future."

However, don't expect Melody of Memory to advance the plot drastically or be as story-heavy as past entries. "The story volume is not going to be as large as a mainline Kingdom Hearts title, so you may not see too big of a movement in Kairi's time and in her narrative," he says. "Still, I think you might get a glimpse of where this might be going through this title. It's quite difficult to not spoil it, but still try to explain it at the same time. But with Kairi, her childhood is still shrouded in mystery. We haven't really delved deep into that part of her narrative, so you might be able to see a glimpse of that through Melody of Memory. But that being said, again, it's not meant to advance things significantly through this game."

The game is all in 3D, something that was a goal from the onset. "We wanted to recreate the original look of the game titles and carry that over," says co-director Masanobu Suzui. The team built the game from the ground up as a new title to accommodate their vision. Square Enix went through painstaking detail to ensure the enemies look not only how you remember, but also move the same way. To fight back at them, you execute ranged and melee attacks by syncing up with the beat, but don't expect a big arsenal of special attacks; there is no ability system and leveling up to get more powerful is the extent of the progression.

But you will have some variety in your party members, so you're not purely playing using Sora, Donald, and Goofy. As you progress through the World Tour mode, new teams open up. You can't assemble custom teams, but it will give you some new flavor, like having a party of Birth By Sleep or 358/2 Days cast members. Disney characters will also sometimes join the fray.

In addition to single-player options, you can take on baddies with friends via online and local co-op, or compete against them online for the top scores.

You also won't always be fighting in field battles, as there is an immersive mode called "Memory Dive," Suzui explains: "For each track, famous scenes related to that music will play one after another in a sequence edited by Visual Works (Square Enix's own CG movie-production studio), so it'll surely be a treat unlike any other for Kingdom Hearts fans." Looks like we're in for quite a trip down memory lane.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

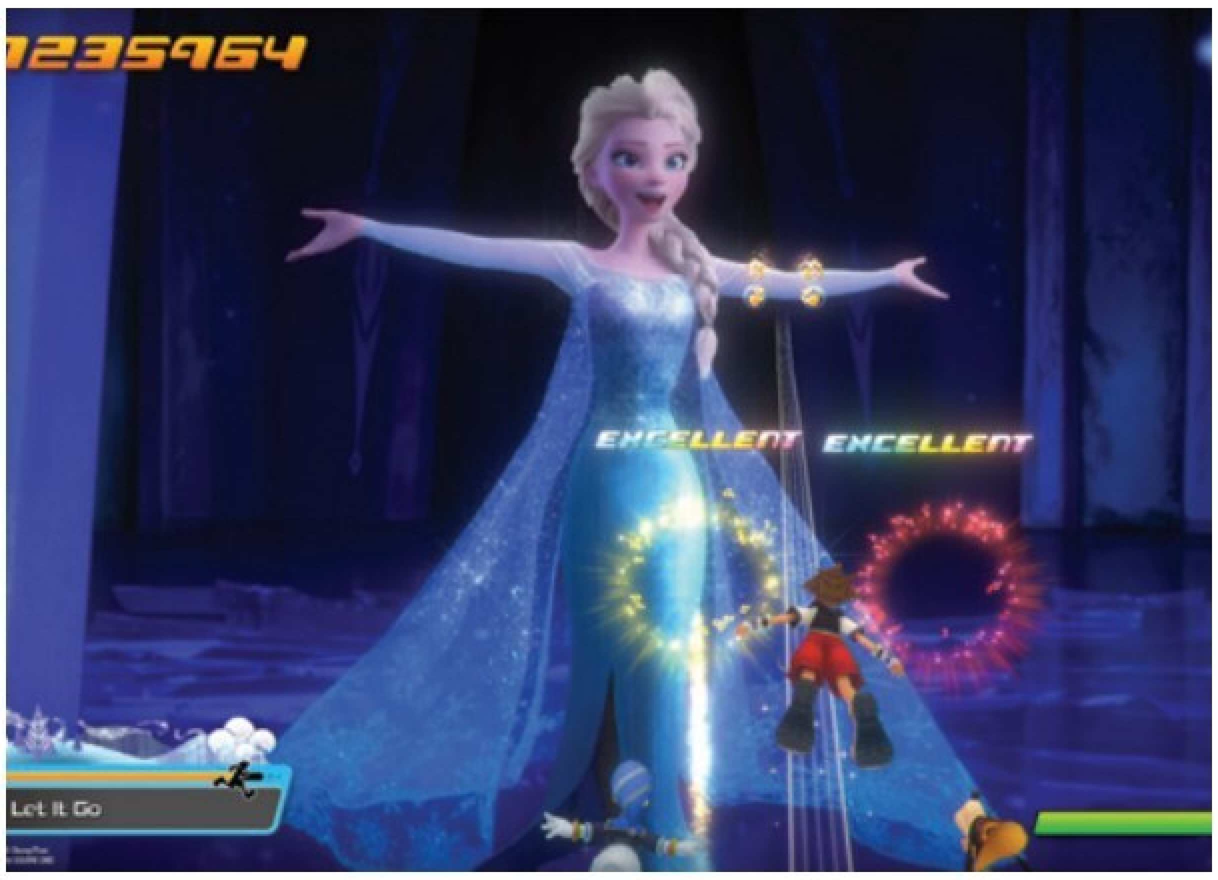
» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

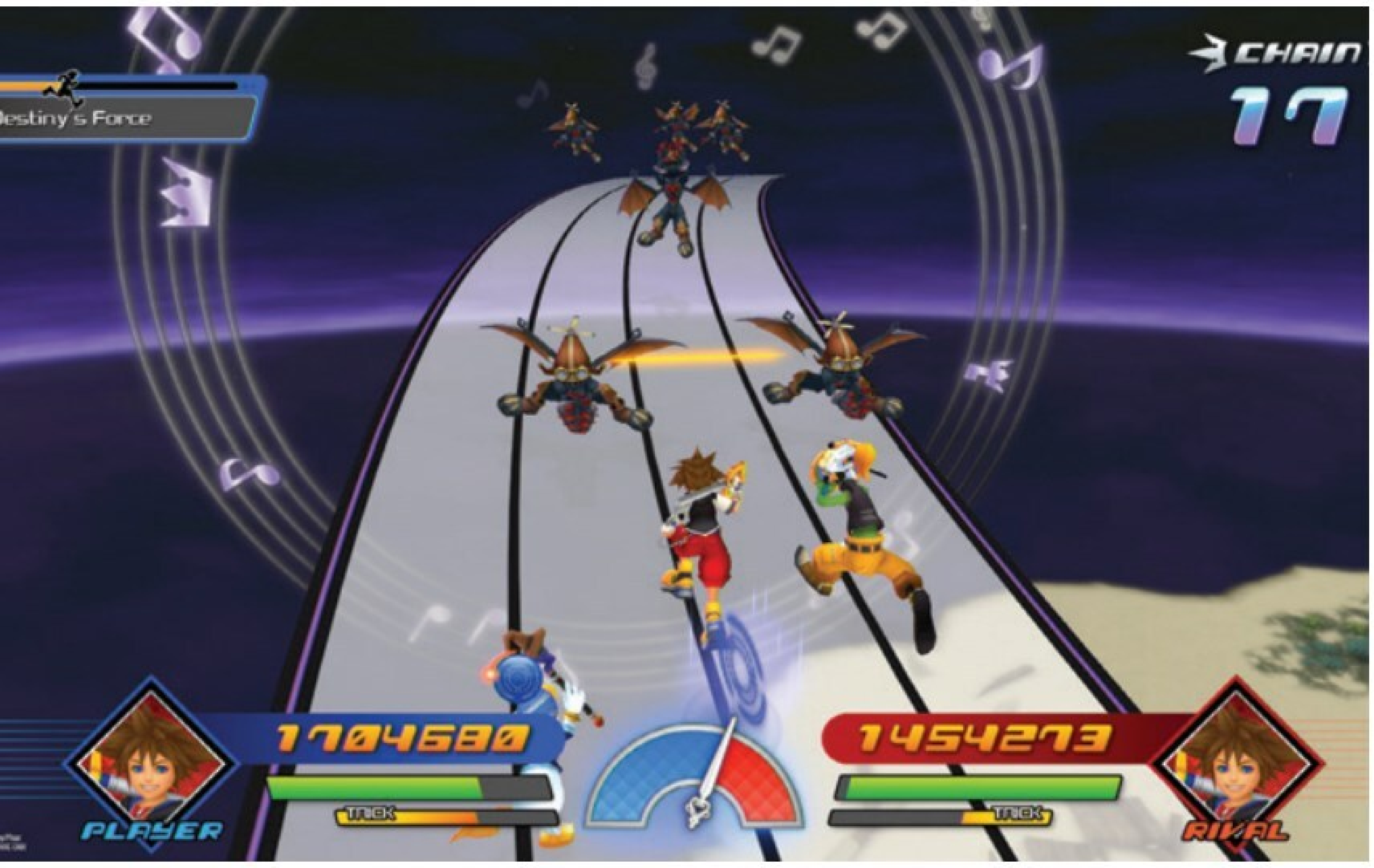
» Style
1 to 2-Player
Action/Rhythm
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
November 13





A List Of Confirmed Tracks

Curious about what songs you can count on for Melody of Memory? Square Enix provided us with the confirmed songs up until this writing. The game will not feature any new tracks, and will only use remixes very sparingly, like in the menus or credits.

Kingdom Hearts
- "A Day in Agrabah"
- "Arabian Dream"
- "Destiny Islands"
- "Go for it!"
- "Hand in Hand"
- "Olympus Coliseum"
- "To Our Surprise"
- "Traverse Town"
- "Under the Sea"
- "Simple and Clean"

Kingdom Hearts Re: Chain of Memories
- "Castle Oblivion"
- "The Force in You"

Kingdom Hearts II -FINAL MIX-
- "The Other Promise"

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days
- "Another Side" (Battle Ver.)
- "Secret of Neverland"
- "Vector to the Heavens"

Kingdom Hearts Re:coded
- "Wonder of Electron"

Kingdom Hearts Birth by Sleep
- "Dismiss"
- "Enter the Darkness"
- "Hau'oli, Hau'oli"
- "Rage Awakened" (The Origin)
- "The Encounter" (Birth by Sleep Version)

Kingdom Hearts 3D [Dream Drop Distance]
- "All for One"
- "L'Impeto Oscuro"
- "The Eye of Darkness"

Kingdom Hearts 0.2 Birth by Sleep -A Fragmentary Passage-
- "Wave of Darkness I"

Kingdom Hearts III
- "Let it Go"

Kingdom Hearts Orchestra -World Tour- Album
- "Destati"

Hyrule Warriors: Age Of Calamity

A tragic prequel

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Koei Tecmo

» Release
2020

One hundred years before The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, all is right with the world. Link has his memories, the brave Champions of Hyrule are alive, and Princess Zelda is free to safely traverse the far reaches of her kingdom. Hyrule is experiencing a golden age of peace and prosperity. However, when Calamity Ganon awakens and the land is shrouded in darkness, our heroes must return to the frontlines to defend their homes. This grand battle and its devastating aftermath is chronicled in Breath of the Wild's upcoming prequel, Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity.

Age of Calamity employs hack-and-slash combat mechanics coupled with Breath of the Wild's gorgeous cel-shaded backdrops. Flashy combos and enemy hordes play an integral role in its gameplay loop, but beloved Legend of Zelda mechanics like environmental puzzles also make appearances. Common monsters like bobokins, guardians, and Yiga soldiers as well as overworld bosses including lynels and hinoxes hinder player progression, but there are plenty of trusty abilities, such as remote bombs and stasis, that can turn the tides of battle.

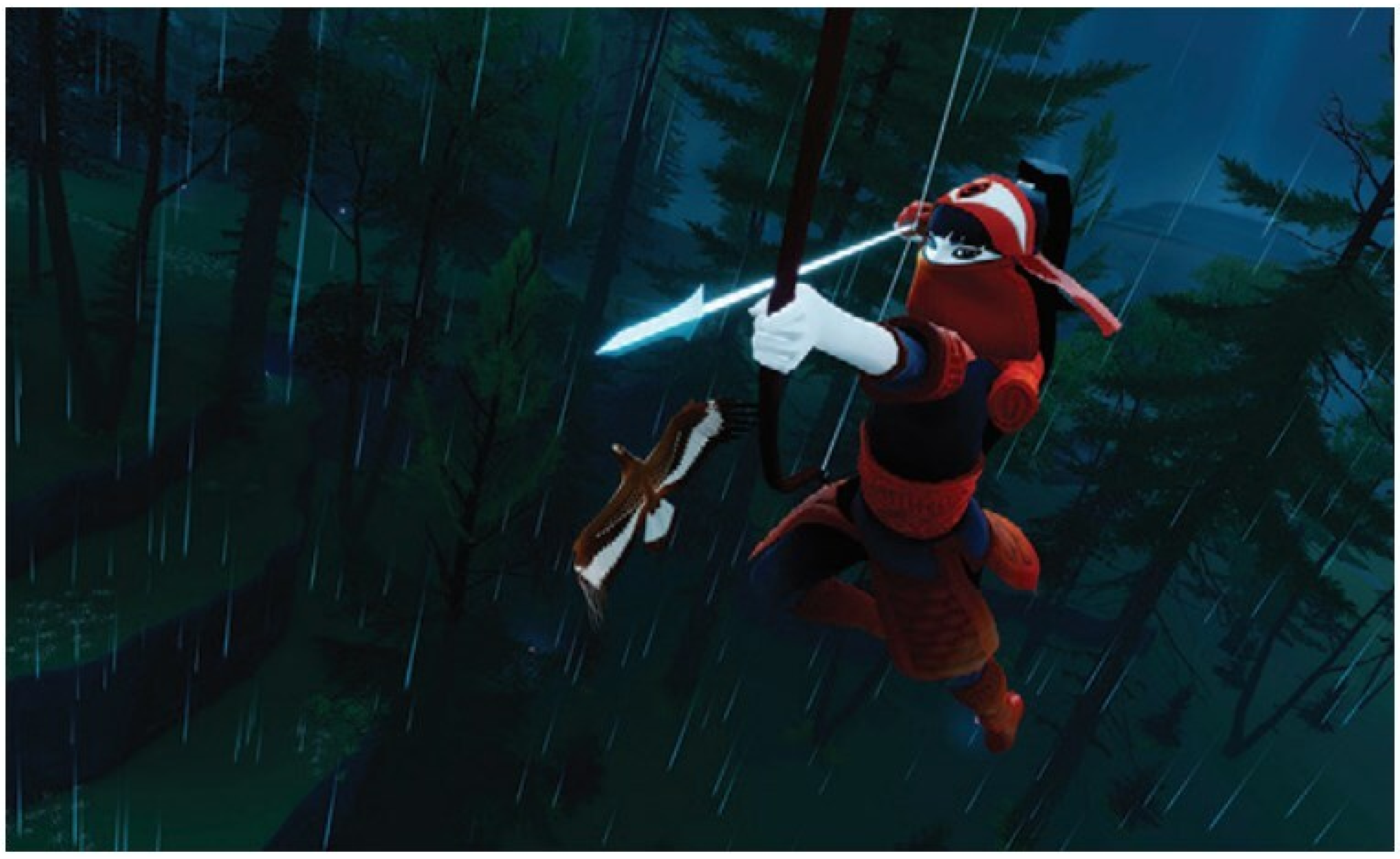
Link is the primary protagonist in Age of Calamity, but we also know that Zelda, the Champions of Hyrule (Mipha, Daruk, Revali, Urbosa), and Young Impa are playable characters with their own respective weapons and fighting styles. Additionally, Age of Calamity supports local co-op, so you can bring a partner along for the journey and experience the epic cutscenes and bombastic action together.

During Age of Calamity's reveal, Koei Tecmo Games Producer Yosuke Hayashi recalled his initial meeting with Nintendo's Eiji Aonuma and how their brief conversation eventually led to the prequel's development. Aonuma felt that The Legend of Zelda's sweeping lore would be perfectly balanced with the large-scale engagements of Koei Tecmo's Dynasty Warriors games. "Unlike the previous Hyrule Warriors game, Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity was developed by working closely with the Zelda team in every step of the process, including gameplay direction, graphics, world, and all dialogue," Hayashi says.

Breath of the Wild presents an intriguing world that fans want to know more about, and Dynasty Warriors is full of unapologetic action. With speedy gameplay and clarifying story moments, Age of Calamity looks to combine the best features of the two franchises that inspired it. » **Jason Guisao**

The Pathless

Into the eye of the storm



» Platform
PS5 • PS4 • PC • iOS

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Annapurna Interactive

» Developer
Giant Squid

» Release
November 12

When developer Giant Squid released Abzû, players and critics alike praised the serene atmosphere and gorgeous visuals in the oceanic diving adventure. With a striking art style, beautiful environments, and terrific sound design, the studio carries those strengths into its follow up release – The Pathless.

However, The Pathless is much more than a peaceful, exploration adventure. The light from the world has been stolen as a dark curse envelops it. As the last Hunter, you travel to an ancient island with nothing more than your trusty bow in hopes of breaking the curse.

This island is full of targets you shoot to gain speed boosts to move quickly through the world. The act of gathering speed adopts a satisfying rhythmic feel as you squeeze the right trigger to charge up an auto-aimed shot and release to hit the target.

I soon stumble upon a giant glowing bird – The Eagle Mother – sprawled out across the steps. The injured leviathan gestures toward glowing obelisks and provides me with an item to cleanse the curse from those towers. After completing simple puzzles and platforming challenges, I clear the path to the next area, where I claim an eagle of my own and encounter the Godslayer, the armored creature behind the curse. After a brief cutscene, he ascends to a floating island, and my quest to defeat his beasts commences.

My eagle companion lets me double jump, glide, and even pick up items to solve environmental puzzles. I reach the top of the first plateau and violent red storms consume parts of the area. The elk beast, Cernos, emerges. After a lengthy process of avoiding his gaze in the storms, it's my turn to go on the offensive in a chase scene, followed by a lengthy face-to-face showdown.

With such a gorgeous world to explore and epic moments like the battle with Cernos waiting in the wings, I can't wait to see what else The Pathless has in store for players. **» Brian Shea**

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OVERCOOKED! ALL YOU CAN EAT
STARDEW VALLEY
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Outcasters

Google has been making a push into video game streaming with its Stadia service for nearly a year, but hasn't given us many reasons to continually log on. Hopefully, that's changing. Outcasters is a competitive top-down shooter coming exclusively to Stadia this holiday season. Up to eight players compete in a variety of colorful worlds, but the big twist to the action is that players can curve their shots, allowing them to hit opponents around corners. Splash Damage's last game was Gears Tactics, so this is a bit of a divergence, but hopefully it's just as fun.

Riders Republic

Ubisoft is going big with its new extreme-sports game, allowing up to 50 players to race together in sports including biking, snowboarding, skiing, wing-suiting, and rocket-wing-suiting. Players can uncover the beauty of America's national parks as the competitions play out in places like Yosemite and Zion. Playable solo or cooperatively, this over-the-top outdoor adventure is targeting PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, and PC when it lands on February 25.

Destiny 2: Beyond Light

Guardians of Bungie's shared-world shooter have a lot to look forward to on November 10, when the Beyond Light expansion arrives. Beyond the new environs of Europa's frozen moon, new Stasis subclass powers promise a huge shift in gameplay. Warlock Shadebinders freeze enemies with staff in hand, Hunter Revenants fling out twin kama blades to create a chilling storm, and Titan Behemoths smash into the ground to create icy quakes.

Baldur's Gate 3

By the time you read this, Baldur's Gate 3 will be available to play in early access. This may be regarded as an odd move for a massive CRPG, but Larian Studios aims to continually expand and improve the game to win over a whole new generation of Dungeons & Dragons adventurers. Another recent addition to the huge project is an integrated Twitch option for streamers that allows their viewers to have a say on the journey's decisions.

Rainbow Six Siege

Operation Shadow Legacy is in full swing. Rainbow Six Siege is possibly one of the best examples of a game that was released to a mild reception, but became a content-rich beast that gradually gained fans through years of tinkering and updates. Now you can play as everyone's favorite secret agent, Sam Fisher, in the latest content drop. Sure, it's no Splinter Cell — but could a new console game be on the way?

Hytale

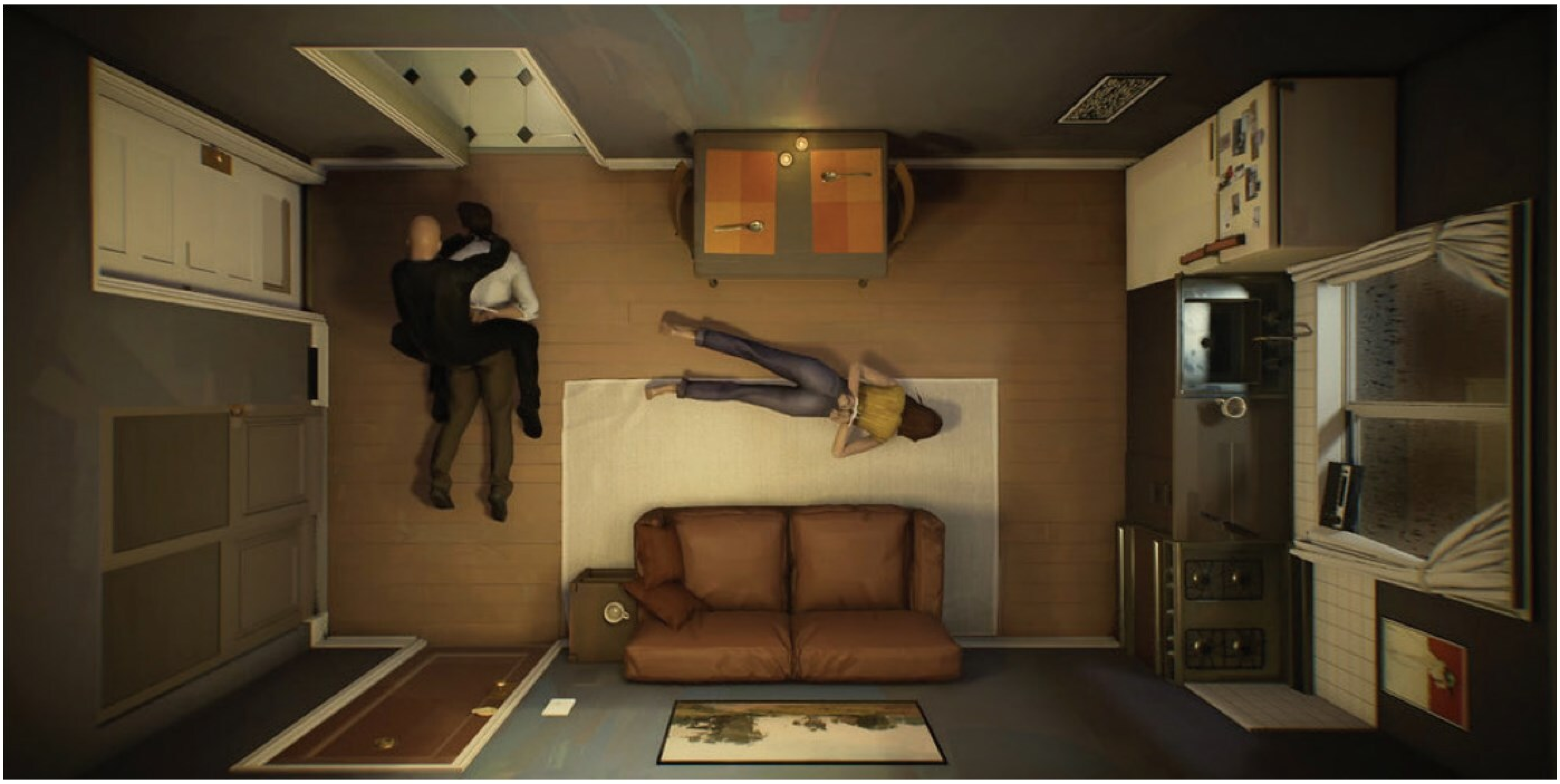
Blocks, crafting, and survival. Minecraft may have paved the way, but Hytale aims to provide all-new adventures. Prepare to dive into dungeons, craft amazing creations, or build your own amazing structures. Grow crops, collect mounts, tame pets, and take on serious monsters as you explore a vast world of possibilities. Look for Hytale to make waves on PC next year.

Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World: The Game – Complete Edition

Ubisoft's game based on the Scott Pilgrim movie is a highly acclaimed 2D brawler from 2010, but the digital-only title has been difficult to play in recent years since it was delisted from online storefronts. That's changing later this year with the release of the complete edition on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, and Stadia. This version contains the full original game (which features an amazing soundtrack from Anamanaguchi) plus both DLC packs.

Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

Super Mario 3D World brought awesome platforming action to the Wii U in 2013, and now it's ready to finally make the leap to the Switch early next year. Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury delivers the same great gameplay, level design, and four-player co-op. However, it also adds new content and the option for online multiplayer. Whether you missed this installment on Wii U or just want to replay it, you can jump back in next year on February 12.

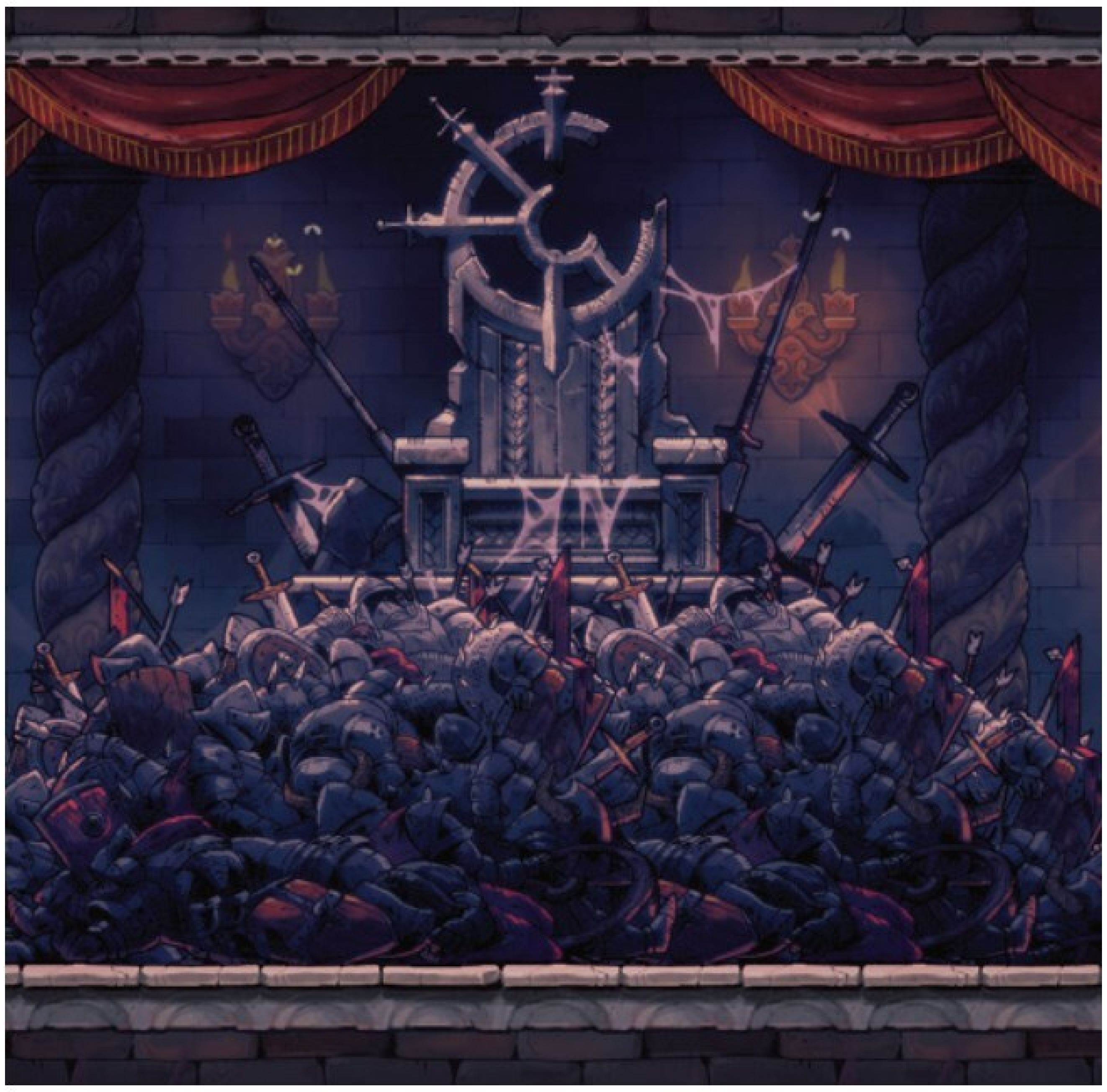


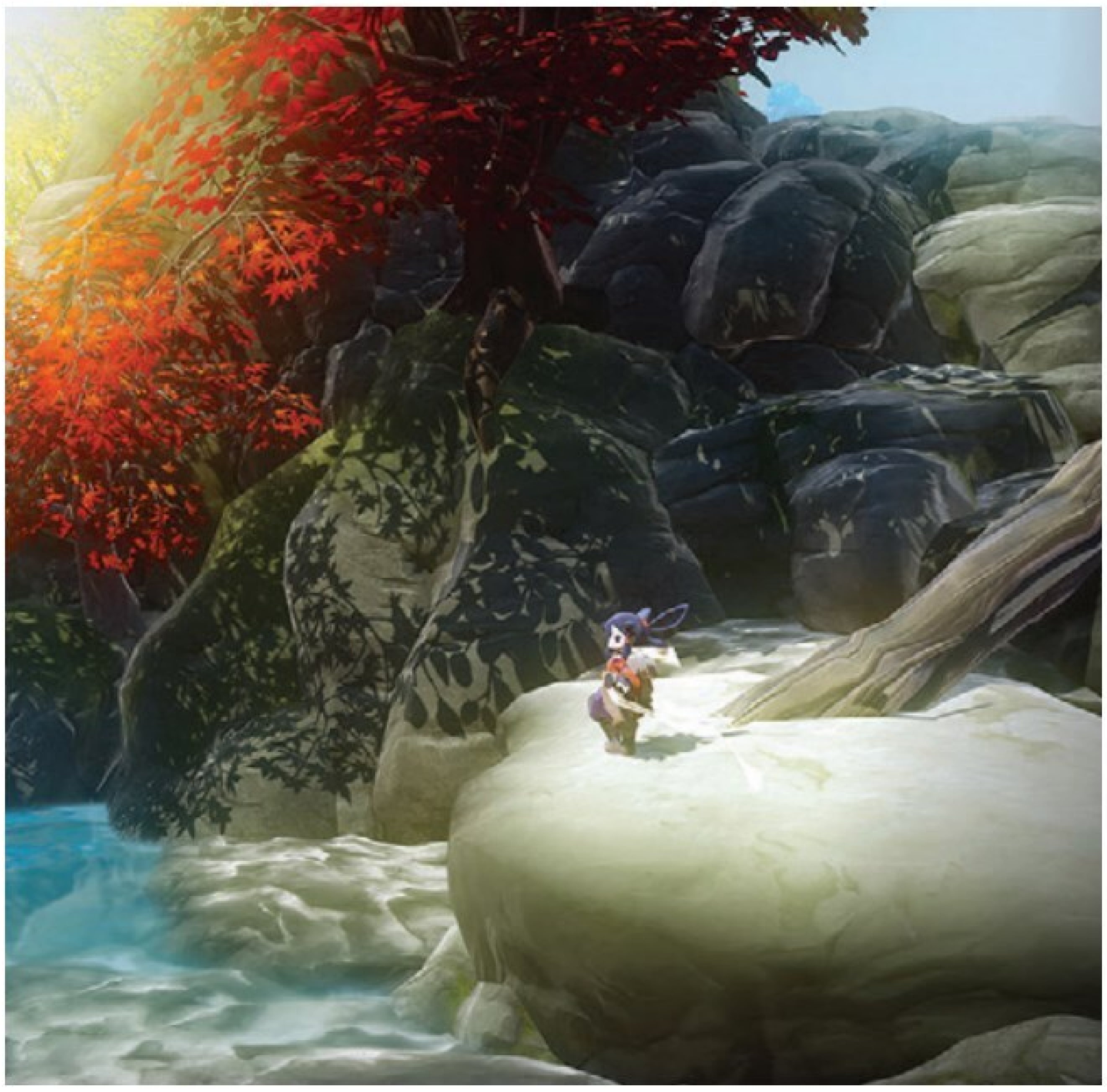
12 Minutes

This top-down puzzle/adventure game features a time-loop narrative about a desperate husband trying to prevent his own death and his wife's murder. The actions players take during each loop carry over, meaning that 12 Minutes is all about how you process and adapt to previous choices and mistakes. With an all-star cast featuring the likes of James McAvoy, Daisy Ridley, and Willem Dafoe, 12 Minutes is shaping up to be an exciting Xbox Series X/S and PC release for late 2020.

Rogue Legacy 2

After the original helped bring roguelites to new audiences, Cellar Door Games is back with some big changes. On top of a new 2.5D visual style, this sequel features unique weapons for each class, a trait system focused on risks and rewards, and heirloom items that transform the game into a Metroid-style experience. Early access is already available on PC, so you can start sending your family's descendants to nearly certain death today.





Sakuna: Of Rice And Ruin

An interesting mix of platforming and farming, this adventure comes from two-person indie team Edelweiss, best known for shoot 'em up Astebreed. A love letter to Japanese mythology, Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin's side-scrolling and simulation elements come to life with a gorgeous art style. The unique hook of crafting, tending the fields, and defeating demons should give us plenty to dive into when it launches on November 10 for PS4, Switch, and PC. ◆

reviews

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 330

82 Genshin Impact

Explore an enchanting open world with colorful characters and endless discovery. Whether you're cooking up a fresh dish, taking on ancient ruin guardians, or gliding to faraway islands, curiosity is your constant companion. Featuring multiple progression systems, big bosses, and even four-player co-op to hang out with your friends, Genshin Impact is a captivating journey through a wondrous land.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Currently unavailable. We don't know when or if this item will be back in stock.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 And 2

Once again nailing the trick

Style 1 or 2-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Vicarious Visions **Release** September 4 **Rating** T

Forget the weird peripherals, bad sequels, and questionable ports that defined Tony Hawk's Pro Skater in the series' later years. Instead, remember the glory days of the late '90s and early '00s, because that's where you're going with Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2. By returning to the first two games in the franchise and modernizing them with changes large and small, developer Vicarious Visions reminds us why we fell in love with this series in the first place.

The overall structure remains completely intact: You select levels based on various locations around the globe, then hop on your skateboard to complete objectives like getting the high score before the time limit expires, collecting letters to spell out "skate," and doing tricks over specific areas. Vicarious Visions keeps the best parts of the game largely intact, but various enhancements, including a larger arsenal of tricks, lifts these classics to new heights. Stringing together tricks feels amazing thanks to smoother controls, and the modern visuals look great in motion.

While these games are fun independent of nostalgia, as a fan of the original games, I loved how this release gives continual nods to the classic versions. Featuring every single real-life skater from those first two games, an enhanced create-a-skater mode, and nearly every song from the classic soundtracks, this is a crowd-pleasing remaster bundle. Stepping back into the shoes of Tony Hawk and crushing a halfpipe as Goldfinger's "Superman" comes over my speakers brought a smile to my face. However, this bundle also adds several current-day skaters and a huge selection of new songs. By masterfully blending old with new, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 lands on a sweet spot.

All the levels from the original games are also available, complete with beautiful makeovers for the current technology. I was continually impressed by how gorgeous these new environments look. The stages feel faithful to the versions you played 20 years ago, while simultaneously featuring the look of new creations. Perhaps most surprising is how well the levels hold up today; skating through the streets of San Francisco and New York still feels great, and the timeless designs of Warehouse, Hangar, and the Chicago Skatepark have me returning time and again. The levels feature fun paths on which you can chain together massive combos, as well as enormous ramps to launch off, countless rails and edges to grind on, and plenty of objects to smash through. The only downside to these stages is that some of the objects you're supposed to destroy, like the school's bells or the "No Skating" signs in Minneapolis can be more difficult to spot since there's a lot more going on visually now.

If you're looking for new places to skate, you can design the park of your dreams. With a massive set of elements choose from, including smart objects you can curve at multiple articulation points, the intuitive creation tools make it easier than ever to transpose the park from your mind to the screen. Once you finish, you can upload your creation to share with other players. I loved exploring the community feature; my favorite created parks ended up being the zany ideas, like an automated rollercoaster for you to grind along, rather than the more traditional skateparks. Unfortunately, I sometimes got stuck inside of objects in created parks as the pieces don't fit together as perfectly as they do in the developer-created levels.

Outside of sharing your parks, you can also jump into online matches. In the frantic and fun online sessions, you compete in a randomized objective playlist of quick-hit matches where eight players vie for the top spot. These objectives are as simple as getting the best score within the time limit or landing the best single combo, or as off-the-wall as graffiti mode, where you try to tag as many of the objects as possible by performing tricks on them. I love how you're essentially into the next match as soon as you finish one, with players able to seamlessly join and drop out without everyone else needing to return to a lobby. While I enjoy the structure of the online play, the experience wears thin fast due to repetitive objectives and an inability to play some of the local multiplayer offerings like H-O-R-S-E- and Tag online. Despite earning cash to spend on cosmetics in the skate shop, I didn't feel motivated to stick around for more than a few rounds at a time.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 makes the experience of playing through these games again feel fresh and current. With contemporary visuals, smooth gameplay, and the iconic soundtrack you remember, the Tony Hawk's Pro Skater franchise may once again have a bright future thanks to this terrific blast from the past.

» **Brian Shea**

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Serve up modern versions of the first two Tony Hawk's Pro Skater games, complete with new and returning skaters, the full suite of levels, and online multiplayer

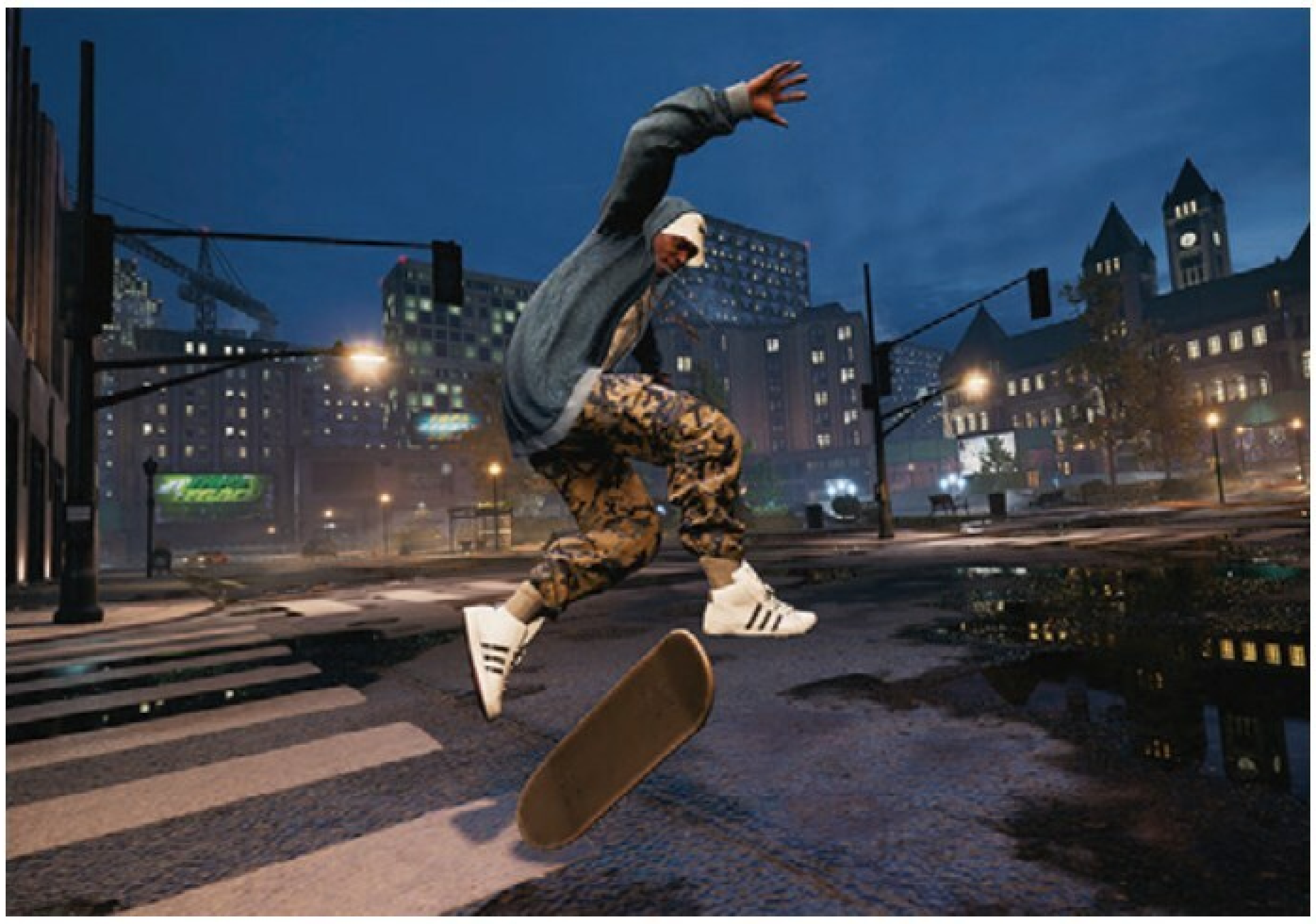
» **Graphics**
With overhauled visuals, these 20-year-old games look right at home on current consoles

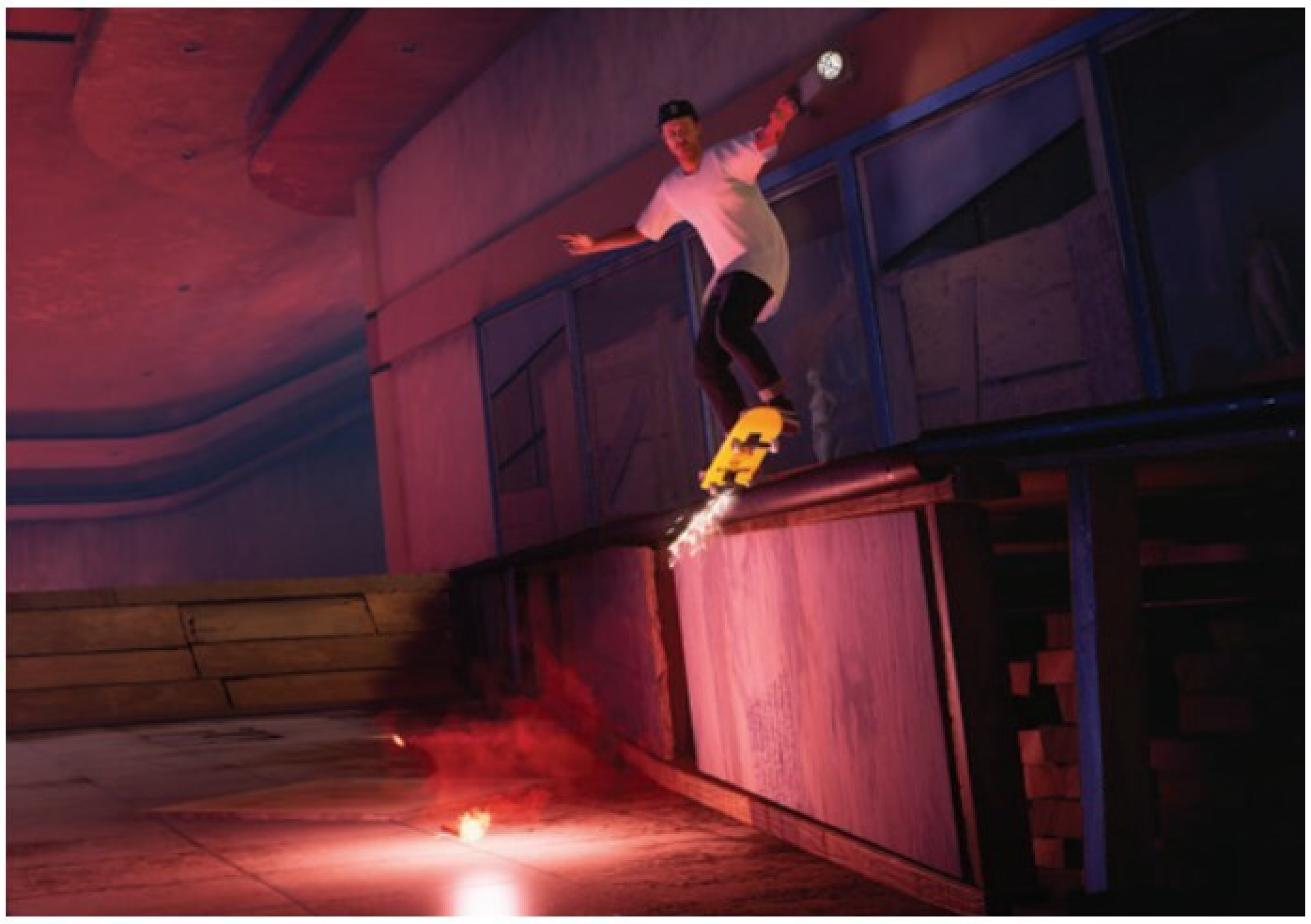
» **Sound**
Skating to these iconic soundtracks again feels great. The huge selection of new songs fit right in with the established vibe

» **Playability**
Stringing together flip tricks, grabs, grinds, and manuals has never felt better thanks to tweaks that make the gameplay smoother

» **Entertainment**
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1 and 2 is the best way to experience these two classic titles

» **Replay Value**
High





Marvel's Avengers

A powerful superhero experience

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Avengers succeeds in its superhero power fantasy and is backed by solid writing, a fun origin story, and plenty of depth to keep you playing

» Graphics
Worlds are swimming with details and the character animations are awesome. The game always looks great, whether you're seeing story scenes or action-packed combat

» Sound
Sandra Saad is perfect as Kamala Khan, and the rest of the voice performers fit their roles well. The soundtrack matches the superhero excitement

» Playability
A lot of care went into making a universal moveset that is easy to grasp while allowing each hero to be distinct. Combat and traversal are both well done

» Entertainment
The amount of depth can be confusing at first, but you have plenty of reasons to keep playing in the endgame

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Crystal Dynamics **Release** September 4 **Rating** T

Like the rampaging Hulk and his transformation into the brainy Bruce Banner, Marvel's Avengers is a game of shifting personas and experiences. Developer Crystal Dynamics delivers a powerful superhero showcase that taps into each Avenger's unique abilities to light up the battlefield in thrilling ways, but when the dust settles, it slows down to show a softer, human side that is every bit as engaging, placing a character you wouldn't expect in the central role.

Crystal Dynamics makes a huge gamble right out of the gate, delivering the message that even though the name Avengers is on the box, this is actually a story about a young girl named Kamala Khan – a huge fan of the super team.

The opening moments show Kamala at an Avengers convention, geeking out when she meets the likes of Captain America and Black Widow. Kamala's viewpoint as a little kid is a refreshing change of pace, and her excitement is likely in line with the player's, showing an appreciation for these awesome heroes. It's a fun way to kick off this story, but I was shocked by just how little screen time the Avengers get in early parts of the campaign. They are hardly featured within the first three to four hours of play, but it oddly works.

The focus this time is instead on Kamala's origin story and her growing into the role of Ms. Marvel. This coming-of-age tale is beautifully penned with some legitimately touching moments along the way. Even as she is learning about her powers, Kamala shows us she's no slouch in combat, using a wild set of fun shapeshifting moves to pummel foes. While combat is the central hook, a good portion of Kamala's gameplay is distinct and consists of frantic platforming.

Ms. Marvel grabs onto ledges, tumbles when platforms crumble under her feet, and barely survives every big leap – all elements that recall Crystal Dynamics' previous work on the Tomb Raider series. Kamala is even pushed to use stealth in a few sequences to sneak past AIM robots that serve MODOK, another character that is realized in awesome ways and is developed thoroughly from start to finish.

The platforming action is differentiated by a superhuman element, allowing players to use Ms. Marvel's stretching abilities to propel her great distances and feel like a hero. These sequences, while impressing with the level destruction often on display, are repetitive in their steps, and fail to deliver a true sense of danger. They do, however, aid the narrative and help Kamala further develop into the game's most dynamic character. It' a game about the Avengers, yet the true star isn't part of their ranks. I love that the story takes chances to keep you off-kilter, all with a satisfying amount of narrative pay-off.

When Ms. Marvel meets the Hulk in her attempt to reunite the team, the entire game structure transforms. It moves from linear, story-driven sequences to a hub format filled with deep RPG systems and a world map with a dizzying array of single-player and cooperative missions. I didn't like hoofing it in the hub world to talk to various vendors, but the map is nicely designed and gives you all of the info you need before jumping into new critical-path missions or side activities.

At this point in the game, Kamala Khan's story remains strong, and is joined by mini-arcs for each of the Avengers. Crystal Dynamics did a nice job creating scenarios tailored to these heroes' unique abilities.

The Hulk is the unstoppable monstrosity you'd hope, smashing enemies and environments to bits. Thor's Mjölnir absolutely wallops enemies, and each swing feels like it is delivered by a god. I also enjoyed the shield antics of Captain America (who doesn't get much screen time for good narrative reasons), and the acrobatics of Black Widow. All of these heroes have great cinematic moments backed by huge gameplay setpieces. I don't want to spoil any of them, but one cool sequence has you frantically running as the environment rotates around you. Crystal Dynamics also keeps you on your toes by challenging the norm for many of the heroes, putting them in situations where they may not have their gear or are wounded.

Iron Man is the only character that I didn't find enthralling. His gameplay isn't bad, but it's tedious; his ranged attacks aren't much fun, and his close-quarters melee isn't as impressive as the other heroes'. Nolan North's performance as Tony Stark is good – his voice and delivery work – but the jokes are overdone, sounding like a one-liner machine on the fritz.

All of the characters share similarities in button mapping, but feel distinct when it comes to combat and moves. Light and heavy combos abound for each hero, and are a blast to use. Each character also has a nice solution for ranged or airborne targets. The dodge, block, and parry systems are put to good use against almost every AIM enemy type, though your foes don't have much variety.

Every encounter and success feeds into an experience point system that allows you to level up and earn new abilities. Avengers offers a surprising amount of depth in this field. You can't really spec out a hero differently than their base potential, but you can add extra moves to combos, speed up cooldowns on ranged attacks, and make each character more lethal in certain ways. There are over 100 abilities for each character. It's a rewarding system that will keep you playing for a long time.

Most of the critical-path missions are nicely designed and offer up plenty of rewards, but the same cannot be said of some of the side activities. For example, some assignments consist of destroying a just few things, so the mission is over almost as quickly as it began; I think I spent more time in the pre-match lobby (which can take time to load and find other players) than actually playing. You also get some odd control-point missions, which push you to stand on a spot to claim it, almost like Crystal Dynamics was thinking about competitive multiplayer ideas and just decided to use them here instead. The control missions are easy with other players at your side, but can be maddening with A.I., which rarely try to claim spaces.

The heroes are better when they are united on the battlefield. The cooperative play is exceptionally good. Most environments are wide-open spaces that allow a full team of four to clobber enemies in style, and you can also up the difficulty with your friends to get better rewards and make the battles more dynamic.

You are pushed to earn better gear to raise each of the heroes' overall power ratings, which you need to tackle harder missions. You may have a power rating of 12, yet need 50 to stand a chance in a particular side mission. Crystal Dynamics clearly has played some Destiny, since the loot system, various currencies, factions, and hub world are nearly identical in concept.

Most of the gear you gain isn't shown cosmetically, and the influx of items makes the experience drag. Getting a +1 spinal cord for Hulk is just weird, and does +1 really make a difference? Sure, the loot makes heroes more potent, but it just isn't fun to collect.

Outside of legendary items, the one category of loot that is instantly satisfying is costumes. Crystal Dynamics loaded up on different outfits for each hero, and a lot of them are great nods to Marvel's comic books. Getting the costumes either requires grinding to earn currency (of which there is an unnecessarily confusing variety), making progress on the Challenge Card (Avengers' equivalent of a battle pass system), or getting a blueprint to fabricate.

Nothing really comes quick in Avengers. I wouldn't call the process a slog, as I had a good time playing missions with friends. However, it goes slowly, making it seem like the structure is designed for you to spend real money to progress faster.

Crystal Dynamics wants you to play this game for years to come, and Avengers has plenty of content to keep you engaged at launch, but replaying missions on higher difficulties to get better gear won't be enough down the road. It doesn't have the competitive hooks of similarly designed games like Destiny. A steady drip of new stories and missions will be needed along with the announced heroes. Avengers is in great shape right now, dazzling with its story and action. I'm hooked on the end-game content that is available now, and I want to see just how powerful these heroes can become after leveling them completely.

Avengers, assemble! You have a great game to play! » **Andrew Reiner**

Star Wars: Squadrons

Roaring with excitement

8.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Set after the events of *Return of the Jedi*, this space-combat game tells a new story, and wows with its multiplayer

» Graphics
Even though it's all set in space, each map has plenty of variety in the backdrops and navigational spaces. The amount of detail in every object is excellent

» Sound
The iconic soundtrack and effects cannot be beat and are in full force. Some of the voice acting is a little overblown, especially when trying to sell drama from the cockpit

» Playability
Dogfighting with an enemy and lining up that perfect shot feels fantastic. The controls are excellently crafted, and the ships are all powerful in different ways

» Entertainment
The single-player campaign teaches you the ropes, but doesn't hit the mark with its story. Multiplayer is always fun and is exactly what it needs to be to wow Star Wars fans

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Motive Studios **Release** October 2 **Rating** T

A hail of green laser fire rips dangerously close to my X-Wing's cockpit as I rocket through the debris of a downed Star Destroyer. A TIE Fighter gives chase, and my astromech unit alerts me that a missile strike is imminent. I put my X-Wing into a spin and dive through a narrow gap in the wreckage, narrowing scraping a wall. In this moment, the Star Wars fantasy of piloting an X-Wing screams with excitement, showing how thrilling the dogfighting between the Rebellion and Empire can be. Developer Motive Studios has created a fantastic multiplayer experience that has the visual detail and edge-of-your-seat thrills of Star Wars' epic space battles, but only fires direct hits in the online space, struggling to captivate with its single-player content.

Star Wars: Squadrons is set after *Return of the Jedi*, with the second Death Star scattered to cosmos and the Empire retreating while looking for ways to strike back at the Rebels. This era gives us the cool ship designs from the original movie trilogy, but with more firepower than Luke Skywalker had at his fingertips. Whether I was in an A-Wing in a hunter role against a TIE Interceptor or a Y-Wing on a bombing run against an Imperial flagship, each craft feels distinct and is a blast to control. The movement is so smooth and precise that you can skip along the surface of an asteroid and safely snake through a space station's interior without dinging the hull.

Unlike most space shooters, Squadrons is only playable from the first-person perspective. This is an odd design given just how iconic these ships are, but the locked viewpoint makes sense given how many systems the player has to monitor at any given time. Rather than littering the HUD with these meters, most of them are visible within the ship's cockpit, and they all function admirably, allowing for quick reads on ammo, radar, and most importantly, how power is balanced throughout the ship.

No matter what ship I piloted, the one-on-one battles against other player-controller ships are almost always intense. These duels can be quite long, as the targeted vessel can make a run for it, dance every which way through cluttered airspace to dodge laser fire, and perhaps get the upper hand and start firing back. The maps are also nicely designed, providing surprisingly cluttered areas for the harrowing chases.

The online 5v5 multiplayer in Squadrons is limited to just two avenues of play: Dogfight, which is wildly fun and is determined by kill count, and Fleet Battles, the heart and soul of this experience that delivers awesome wars of attrition. Fleet Battles flow to a moving front that forces you into offensive and defensive positions. Victory is achieved when your opponent's flagship is destroyed, which takes time; victory can come down to barely visible slivers of health on both opposing flagships.

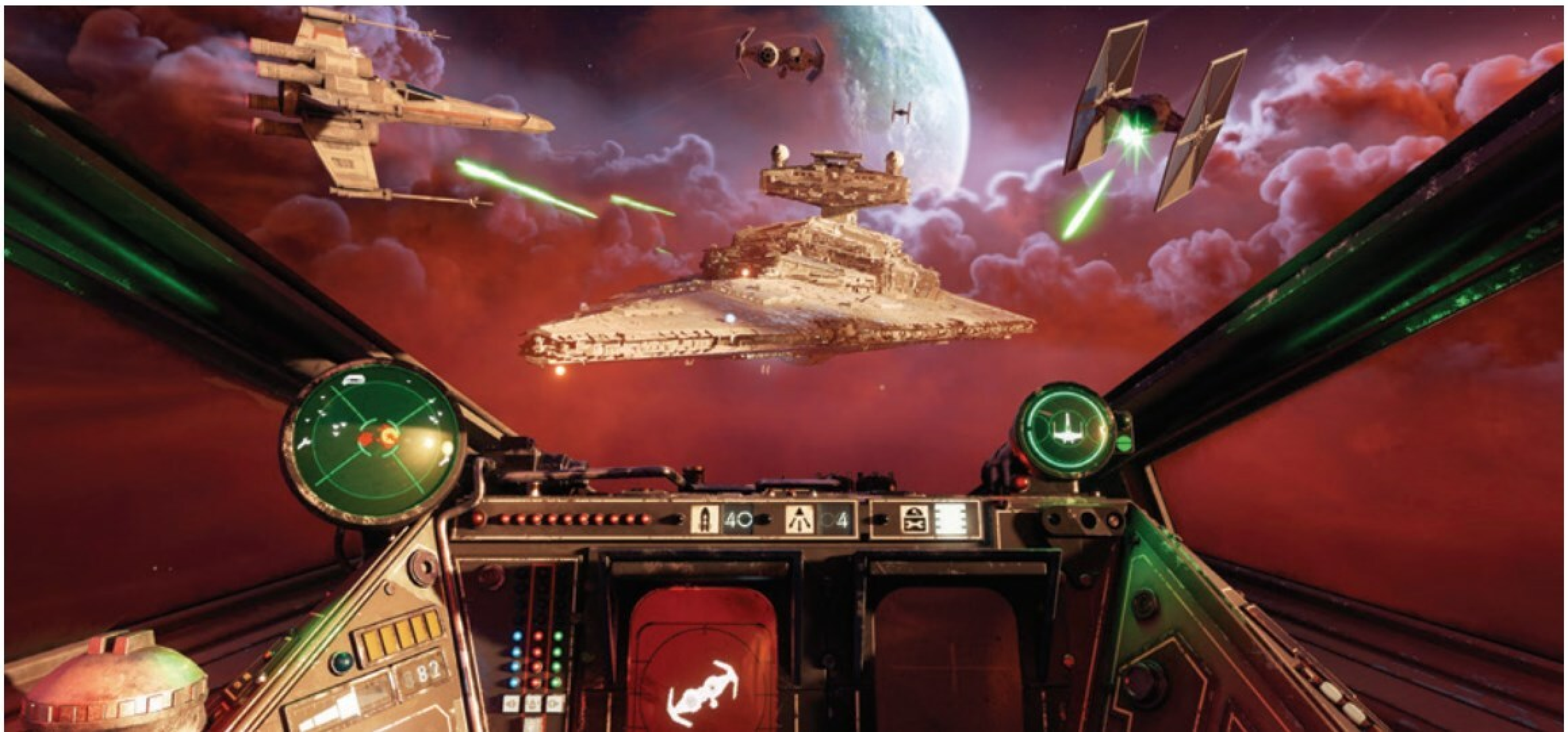
After a match concludes, experience points are accumulated and currency is handed out to purchase new cosmetic items for both your ship and pilot, including goofy bobbleheads which are always viewable in the cockpit. The player can use a different earned currency to buy new ship components to add even more depth to the loadouts, but there isn't much there and the well of unlocks dries up quick.

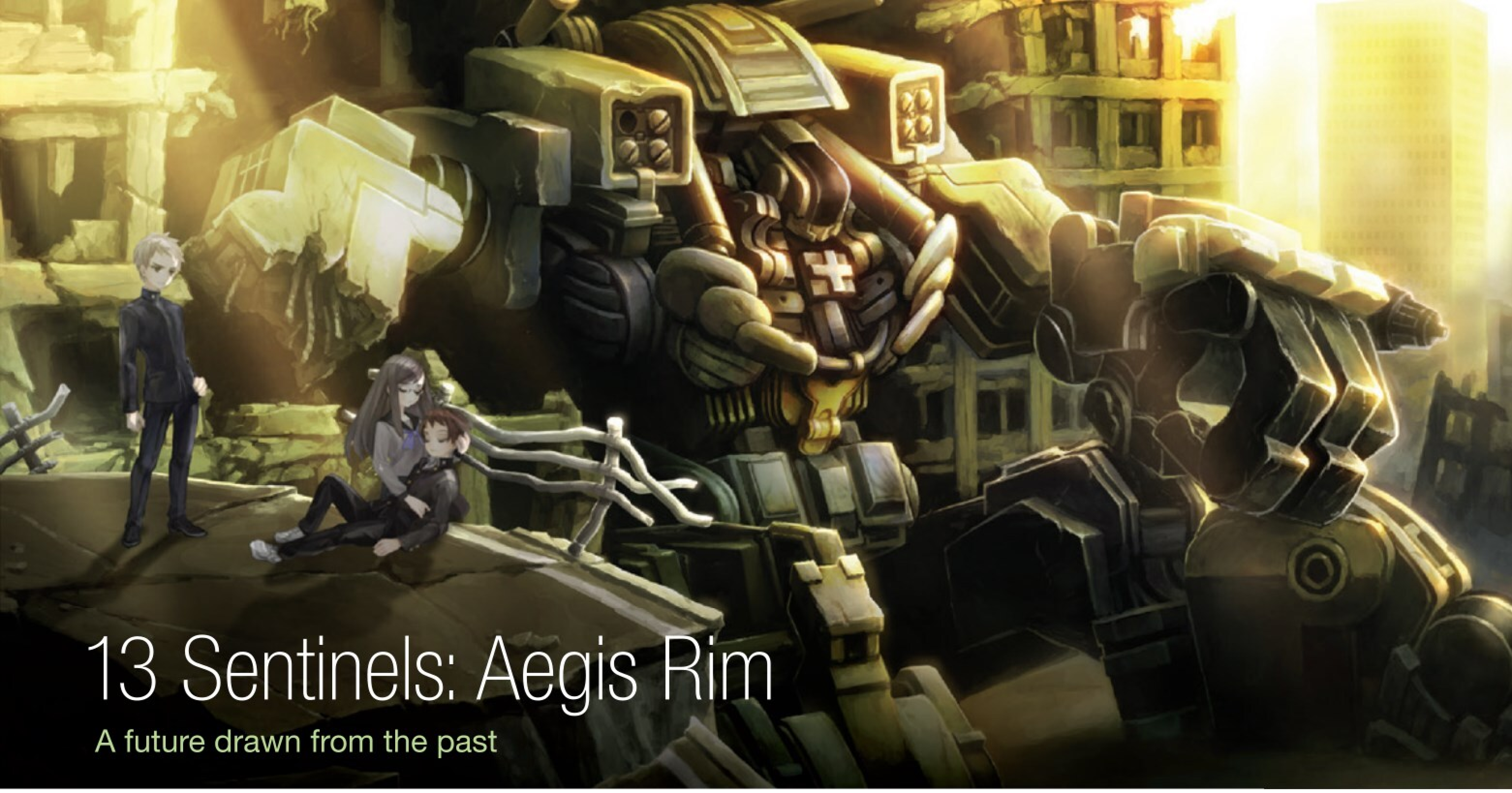
While Squadrons' single-player campaign introduces a number of cool Star Wars characters, most of the story is told as they stand around in a hangar or at the briefing table. It doesn't have much of a pulse, even though the narrative setup of a mysterious "Starhawk" project is quite good and remains an intriguing focus point for the entire arc. When plot is delivered mid-flight, the dialogue is rough and lacks impact, and certain moments could be framed more clearly.

Flying all of the ships in the single-player experience remains enjoyable, but the enemy A.I. doesn't put up a good fight, and is the worst part of the entire game. The A.I. pathing is also a mess. Watching a TIE Fighter fly directly into an asteroid and then slowly spin on its axis to get free made me cringe. Some of the set pieces are good, but most of the campaign missions play out like mini tutorials.

All of Squadrons' content is fully playable in VR, and is a perfect fit for this medium. Through a headset, the battles feel like they are much larger in scale (even though they're exactly the same as on TV), and I loved being able to sneak a quick glance at my astromech unit whenever it chirped.

Squadrons' single-player may fizzle out frequently like a malfunctioning hyperdrive motivator, but the multiplayer continually impresses and is worth the price of entry alone. Flying in formation with a group of friends put a smile on my face, and that was just the calm before the storm. Given just how enjoyable it is to pilot an X-Wing or TIE Fighter, this is a multiplayer experience I will continually go back to, even if EA doesn't support it with new content. It's just fun to play, providing something different compared to most of today's competitive games. **» Andrew Reiner**





13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim

A future drawn from the past

Style 1-Player Adventure/Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Vanillaware **Release** September 22 **Rating** T

As a narrative genre, sci-fi has limitless possibilities. It encompasses far-flung concepts like time travel, rampaging monsters, android assassins, and more. Even with all of that within reach, most sci-fi stories limit their scope to exploring just a few big ideas. However, 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim shows no such restraint. It's an all-inclusive, pulpy feast that draws inspiration from every corner of the sci-fi kingdom; it's *The War of the Worlds* plus *The Terminator* plus *Neon Genesis Evangelion* plus several other well-known media that would spoil important plot points if I mentioned them. But here's the most amazing part: It all works together.

The bonkers story and gorgeous art are the main attractions in 13 Sentinels. It also has some tactical combat, but the game is primarily a visual novel about a group of teenagers who pilot giant armored suits called sentinels. They do this to save the world from an invasion of seemingly alien beasts, but the characters also deal with personal drama along the way, navigating their relationships and desires in the midst of the looming crisis. I like how the tale gradually shifts its focus, starting with a familiar school-life setup before layering in the more outlandish developments. For example, one girl has a crush on a cool new student, while another befriends a mysterious robot. I won't ruin any revelations or surprises here, but I was ultimately satisfied by the journey. It sometimes relies too much on homages rather than its own ideas, but even as a tour of popular sci-fi concepts, the story is entertaining.

Though you still advance through plenty of dialogue boxes, 13 Sentinels gives you more agency than typical visual novels. Your actions won't change the final result, but I was still impressed by how modular the narrative is. Protagonists have their own arcs divided into chapters, and you can jump between them freely. You can get to know the girl obsessed with U.F.O.s, then switch to the boy who loves kaiju movies. My initial intent was to finish one entire arc before proceeding to the next, but that isn't possible; your progress with some characters is contingent on meeting other conditions, so you need to leave them partly finished and follow other threads. However, these bottlenecks aren't frustrating. Instead, they build mystery and anticipation, sometimes leaving off on cliffhangers that had me excited to unlock the next sequence.

Some character arcs can only continue once you have cleared certain battles, which is the other major component of 13 Sentinels. You engage in tactical combat across different sections of the city, unleashing missiles and lasers against hordes of advancing enemies. The best thing I can say about this whole mode is that it is mercifully unobtrusive; fights aren't difficult enough to be a significant barrier to your progression (unless you set them to hard), so you can plow through a bunch of them and then get back to the story. I like the systems that support the combat, like purchasing and upgrading moves for each of your 13 sentinels, but your time on the battlefield doesn't have the depth to make all that tinkering exciting.

The combat encounters aren't even cool to watch because the tactical mode uses simplified and generic representations that don't do the action justice. It's a shame the sentinels are disappointing when you're in the cockpit, because their designs look awesome when you see them up close in the narrative campaign. In contrast to the visually bland battles, the story scenes all feature lovely 2D illustration. You watch beautiful sunsets and visit cozy homes full of delicious-looking food, all while controlling characters brought to life with stylish animations that express their personalities. Stunning art is developer Vanillaware's hallmark, and that tradition continues here – as long as you aren't in combat.

Vanillaware's previous games include fantasy-inspired fare like Odin Sphere, Muramasa, and Dragon's Crown. With 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, the studio doesn't just dip its toes into sci-fi; it jumps into the deep end with a story that takes inspiration from the genre's most iconic works. While that doesn't result in the most original plot, it is still a fun and ambitious experience that combines high-school drama and huge robots in a (mostly) beautiful package.
» Joe Juba

8

PS4

» Concept
A bunch of teenagers attend high school, pilot enormous robots, and try to figure out time travel in a hybrid experience that is part visual novel and part tactical RPG

» Graphics
The character and environmental illustrations are stunning, but the visuals in battle look painfully generic by comparison

» Sound
I played using the Japanese language track with subtitles, though English dialogue is available as a free download

» Playability
Interacting with the world is easy, and issuing combat commands is straightforward

» Entertainment
Even with lackluster battles, the constantly escalating stakes and evolving story pulled me in

» Replay Value
Moderate

Spelunky 2

Enthralling entropy

9

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Mossmouth
Developer Mossmouth, Blitworks **Release** September 15 (PS4), September 29 (PC) **Rating** T

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Dive back into the shifting cave system of Spelunky, this time with branching paths, new enemies, and mounts to ride

» **Graphics**
Beautiful environments are a treat to behold, and improved physics make water and lava look great as they slip through holes and cracks in the world

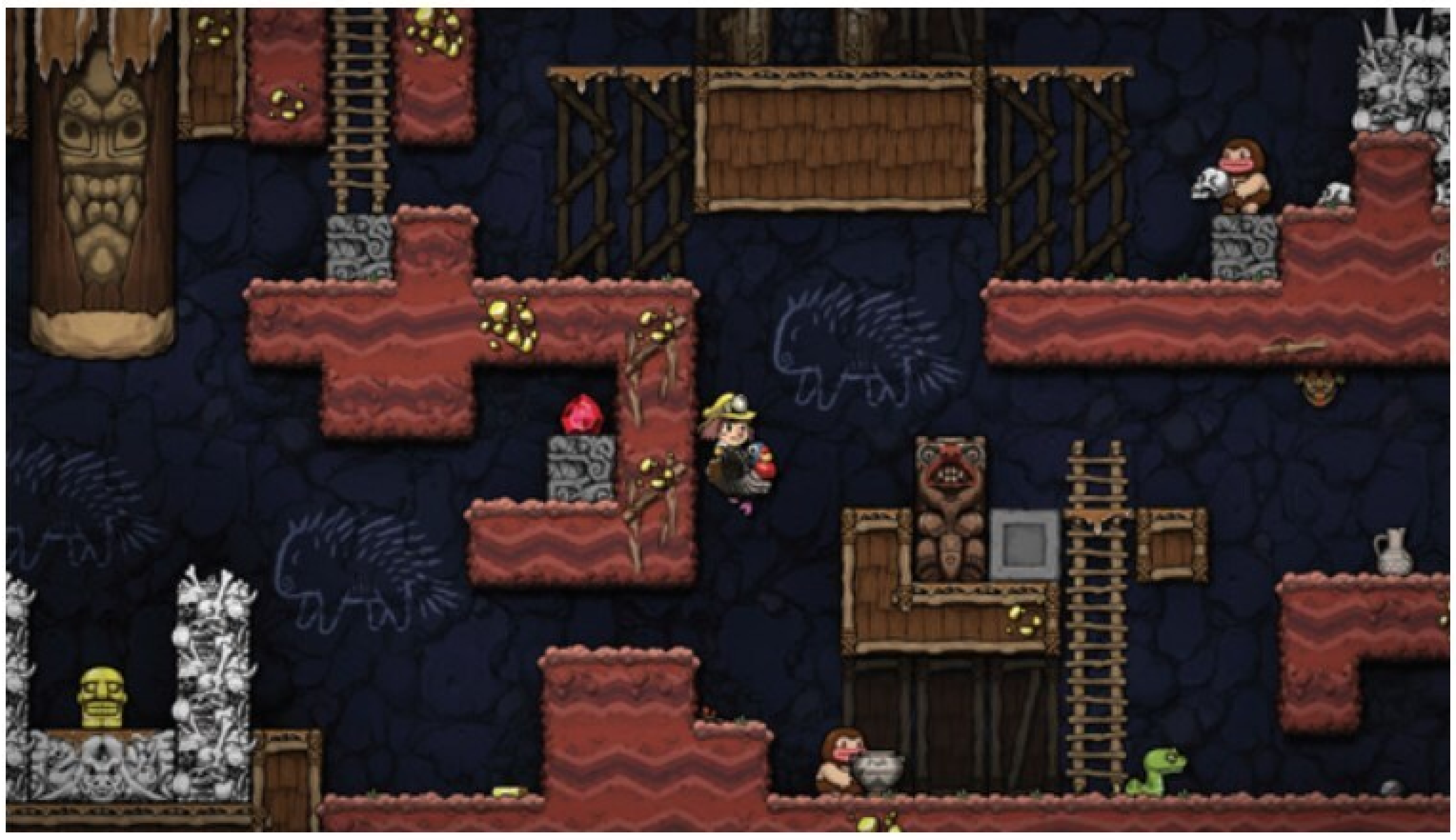
» **Sound**
Helpful audio cues hint at nearby side-objectives, while a solid soundtrack accompanies the on-screen chaos

» **Playability**
Despite its high degree of difficulty, Spelunky 2 is easy to pick up and play thanks to simple and tight controls

» **Entertainment**
No matter how many times I yelled in frustration, I couldn't wait to jump right back into the ever-shifting caves

» **Replay Value**
High

"This is the run where I make real progress," I tell myself. "Last time I got careless, but this time will be different." With that self-assurance, I descend into the caves of Spelunky 2 for the umpteenth time. Masterfully dodging booby traps and whipping bats, spiders, and snakes before they can steal my health, I make it through the first level with ease. My confidence rises as I pick up a crossbow from the shopkeep. Everything is going according to plan, when suddenly a horned lizard rolls into me, knocking me back and setting off a glorious chain reaction featuring skeletons, arrow traps, and eventually, a spike pit that triggers my demise. I'm frustrated my best-laid plans fell apart so fast, but as soon as the option to start a new run appears, I can't select it fast enough.



Despite the many times I've yelled as my character's body bounces around like a pinball from scenarios such as that, Spelunky 2 is unceasingly fun. Maintaining the same formula as its predecessor, the engaging roguelike action-platformer drops you into a procedurally generated cave system and dares you to get further than you did last time. The engrossing difficulty and randomization of the world effectively combines with that very desire to do better, providing the drive to take on another round. As you dig deeper into the caverns, you uncover new biomes, like an aquatic-themed area with killer fish and octopuses that are all too willing to end your run. While starting over at level 1-1 can make the experience tedious, multiple visits to the deeper areas grants you the ability to start your run at that point instead. The procedural generation provides nearly endless levels to play through, and the distinct worlds introduce new elements and challenges to keep the experience fresh as you progress deeper into the caves.

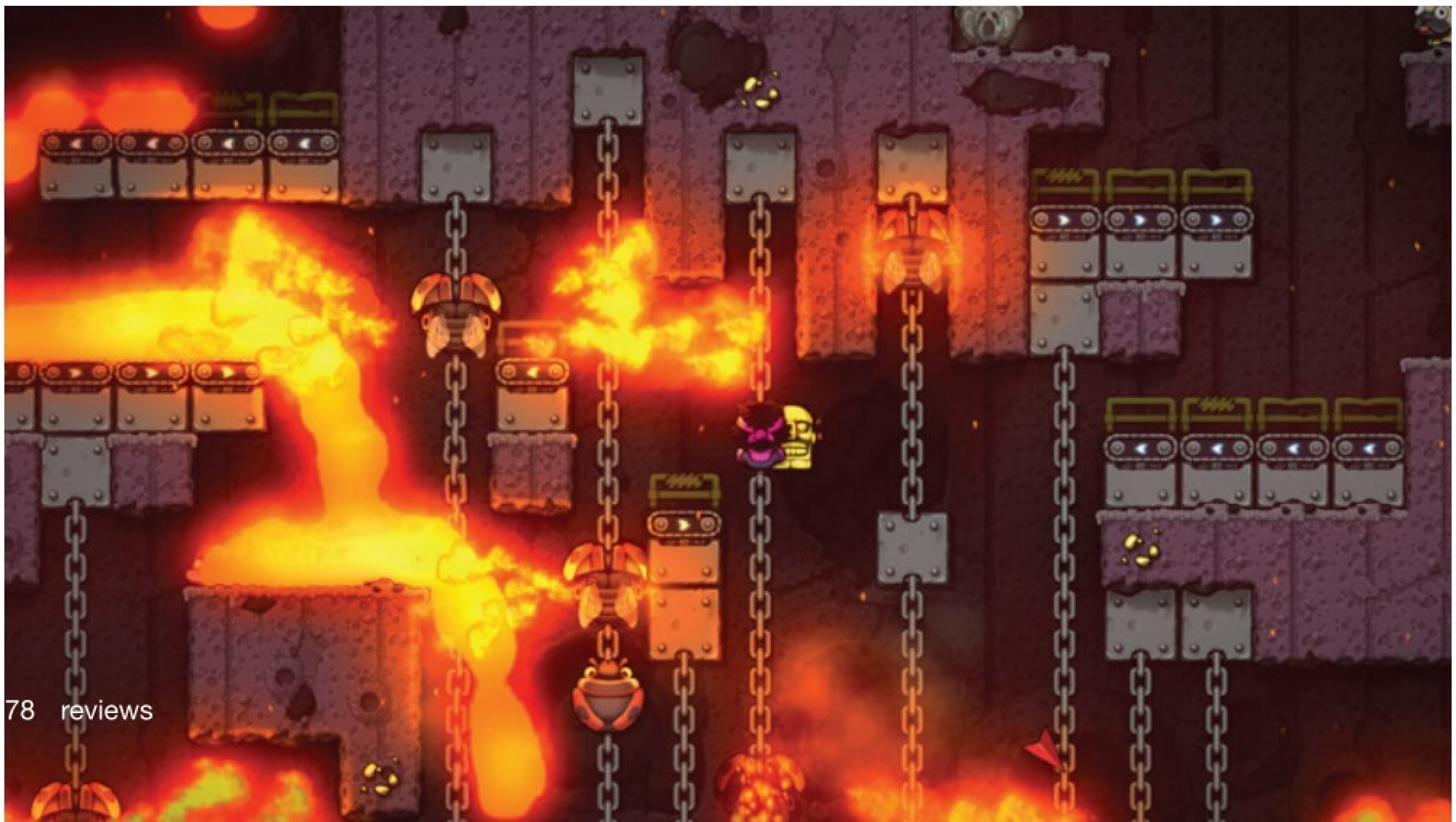
This time around, you can chart your path depending on the challenges you want to encounter. After completing the first area of the cave, do you venture into a lush jungle flooded with monkeys and man-eating plants? Or do you want to brave the volcanic foundry full of explosive robots and fire-spewing ladybugs? I love getting to decide which world to tackle as I reach these new areas, and I'm continually impressed at how different each biome feels from the others.

In addition to being able to choose your path through the caves, Spelunky 2 adds new secret areas you can duck into for treasures, challenges, and even new characters to rescue and add to your community back at base. It's fun seeing the people you save appear at your camp, but too often these passageways lead to nowhere, causing me to sometimes disregard them since they're usually wastes of time. This further highlights the main pitfall of procedural generation: While skill clearly plays a large role in your overall success, luck is also a factor as some runs are significantly easier than others. Still, no run is impossible, as Spelunky 2 ensures there's a clear path to each level's exit, so I tried to make sure I took advantage of the times fortune favored me.

While descending into the caves alone is a blast, you can enlist help in the form of NPCs, who are often so aggressive that the best you can hope for is they'll take down a few enemies en route to causing their own demise. You can also discover helpful mounts like a turkey that can headbutt enemies and glide, a fire-breathing dog, or a lizard that spits bubbles. However, the better company to keep comes from multiplayer, which can now be played locally or online. As you might expect, chaos reigns supreme as you add more players into the mix; don't expect to make better progress with your friends, but it sure is fun.

Unfortunately, with a game as demanding as Spelunky 2, any bit of lag is noticeable. That means local multiplayer is definitely the better option; I experienced minor-yet-persistent lag when exploring online with friends.

Spelunky 2 is as addictive an experience as I've played this year. Two-minute-long runs stack to turn into consecutive hours of gameplay, and "just one more try" easily turns into an afternoon of exploring, dying, and trying again. Spelunky 2 is at once captivating, stressful, and exciting, and even now, I can't wait to once again test my mettle within the cave's ever-shifting walls. » **Brian Shea**



Mafia: Definitive Edition

Loyal to a fault

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Hangar 13 **Release** September 25 **Rating** M

Mafia: Definitive Edition is an interesting time capsule that not only lets players experience Tommy Angelo's rise in an ersatz '30s-era Chicago dubbed Lost Heaven, but will likely inspire greater appreciation for how far the industry has come since 2002. Hangar 13 has rebuilt the nearly 20-year-old game, bringing the visuals up to contemporary standards and adding a few quality-of-life enhancements while ultimately respecting the original's core design. It's an admirable approach, but then you have to actually play the damned thing.

The early Mafia games used their open worlds differently than their competitors, with cities that aren't really interactive playgrounds, but are more similar to film soundstages. You're free to peel off from the next story beat and explore side streets and back roads, but don't expect to find much in the way of optional activities or interesting secrets. Instead, the narrative relentlessly drives you forward, with the end of one chapter propelling you right into the start of the next. Need to catch your breath? Too bad! It's an interesting approach, and one that I'd probably enjoy more if the story was more engaging. Unfortunately, Angelo's tale is disjointed and boring, with time skips that undermine how you're supposed to feel about the relationships that he apparently builds over the years.

Angelo's story is told in flashbacks as he's going over his past with an investigator. He starts his rise as a taxi driver pulled into the mob by happenstance, then becomes the victim (and participant) in all the intrigue, backstabbing, and capers you'd expect. There's an interesting tale in here somewhere, but the timeline moves so erratically that I never felt connected with Angelo's plight as a man caught between loyalties. We meet his eventual wife and are told that they love each other, but their interactions are so lifeless and sparse that Angelo's eventual speech about the importance of family feels hollow and unearned. The newly recorded voice performances are solid, but inconsistent. Some characters, like Angelo and Don Ennio Salieri, give understated, naturalistic performances. It's jarring to hear them interact with characters like Paulie, who gives his lines a livelier (and occasionally hammy) read. Sometimes, it feels like these characters are yanked from different stories.

Nearly every mission predictably ends in a hail of gunfire; it's a gangster story, after all. In addition to tossing molotovs and filling the air with bullets, I also hurled a consistent stream of profanity at my television. The gunplay is simply terrible, with weapons that feel sluggish and underpowered. It's not uncommon to dial in several headshots before an enemy registers the damage, flopping to the ground in a dramatic ragdoll flop. Rival gangsters glide between cover points like Fred Astaire on ice skates, or pop in and out of safety in suicidal frenzies. Melee combat is even worse, with successful button-mashing rewarding you with canned finishing-move animations that look like hokey fight choreography from a middle-school production of *West Side Story*. And woe to those who trigger one of these unskippable animations in the middle of a battle. Enemies may be able to shrug off your bullets, but you're not so lucky.

Ultimately, it's difficult to shake the feeling that you're playing a relic from a bygone era. There are some set-piece moments, such as busting down a warehouse door with a rail car or escaping an abandoned prison, but the thrills that they may have once offered are brought down by the subpar gameplay you're stuck with once the smoke clears. The worst examples are the times when you're forced into stealth sequences. There are only a few of these sections, thankfully, but the "raise the alarm means game over" failure stakes make them more about frustration than building tension.

The original Mafia was well-received at its release, and I'm sure a lot of people remember it fondly. For me, it's something that's probably best seen as a foundational statement in a series that got better over time and subsequent entries. As part of the Mafia trilogy, it's an interesting footnote on what came before. As a standalone game that can hold its own against modern titles in the open-world genre? Fugetaboutit. » **Jeff Cork**

5.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Revisit Tommy Angelo's ascent in Lost Heaven's criminal underworld, in a complete remake of the 2002 open-world game

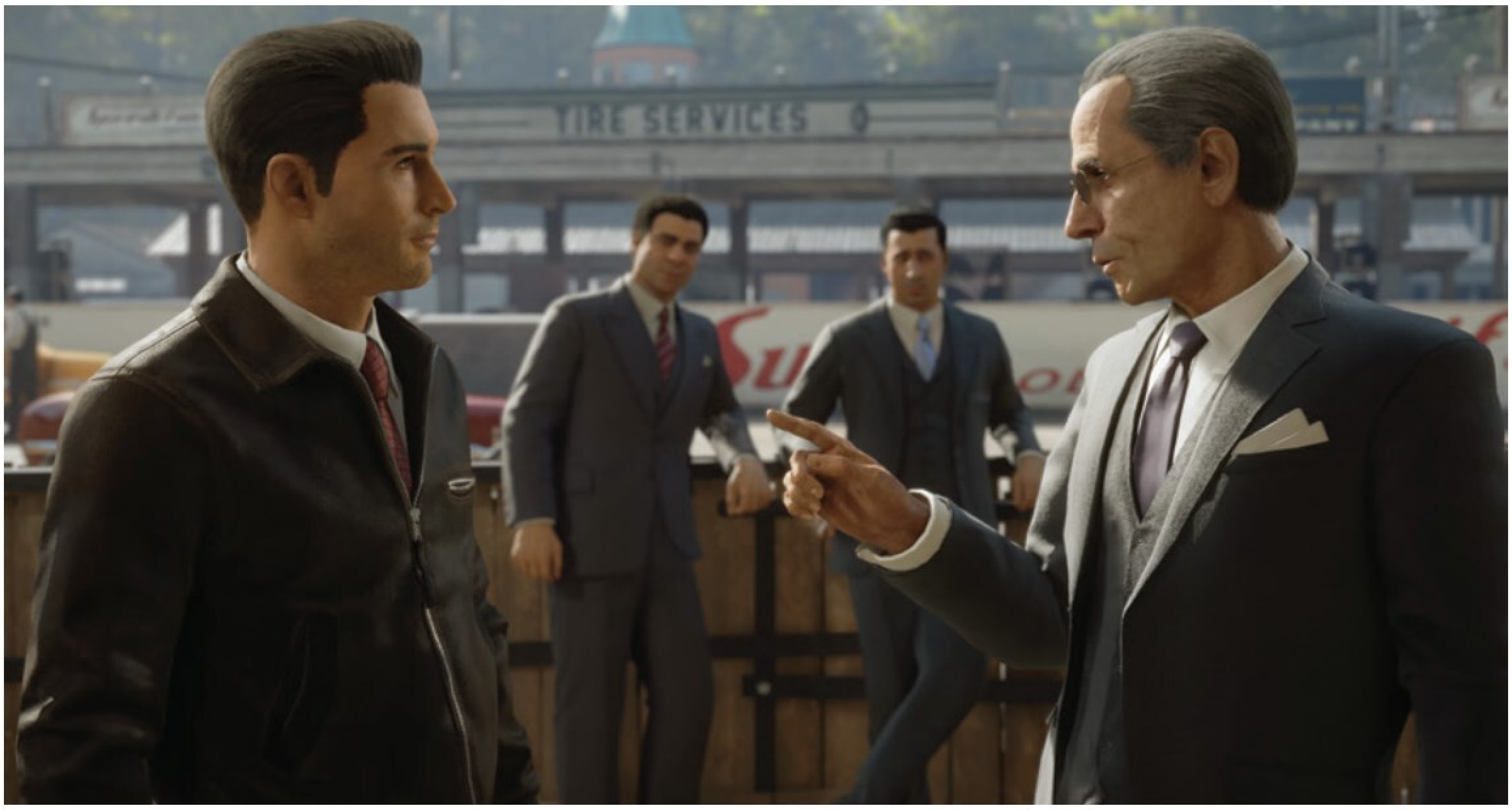
» Graphics
The visuals are an improvement over the original, but dodgy animations and lackluster environments pull the experience down

» Sound
The new orchestral score occasionally seems better suited for a Bugs Bunny cartoon. The licensed '30s tunes add to the atmosphere

» Playability
Gunplay is awful, melee combat is unintentionally hilarious, and forced stealth sections are a reminder of how far games have come in the years since the original's debut

» Entertainment
Faithful almost to a fault, Hangar 13's remake puts a glossy finish on a title that is fundamentally musty by contemporary standards

» Replay Value
Low



Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time

Precision platforming

8.5

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Toys for Bob **Release** October 2 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
A return to the unique brand of '90s platforming that put Crash Bandicoot on the map

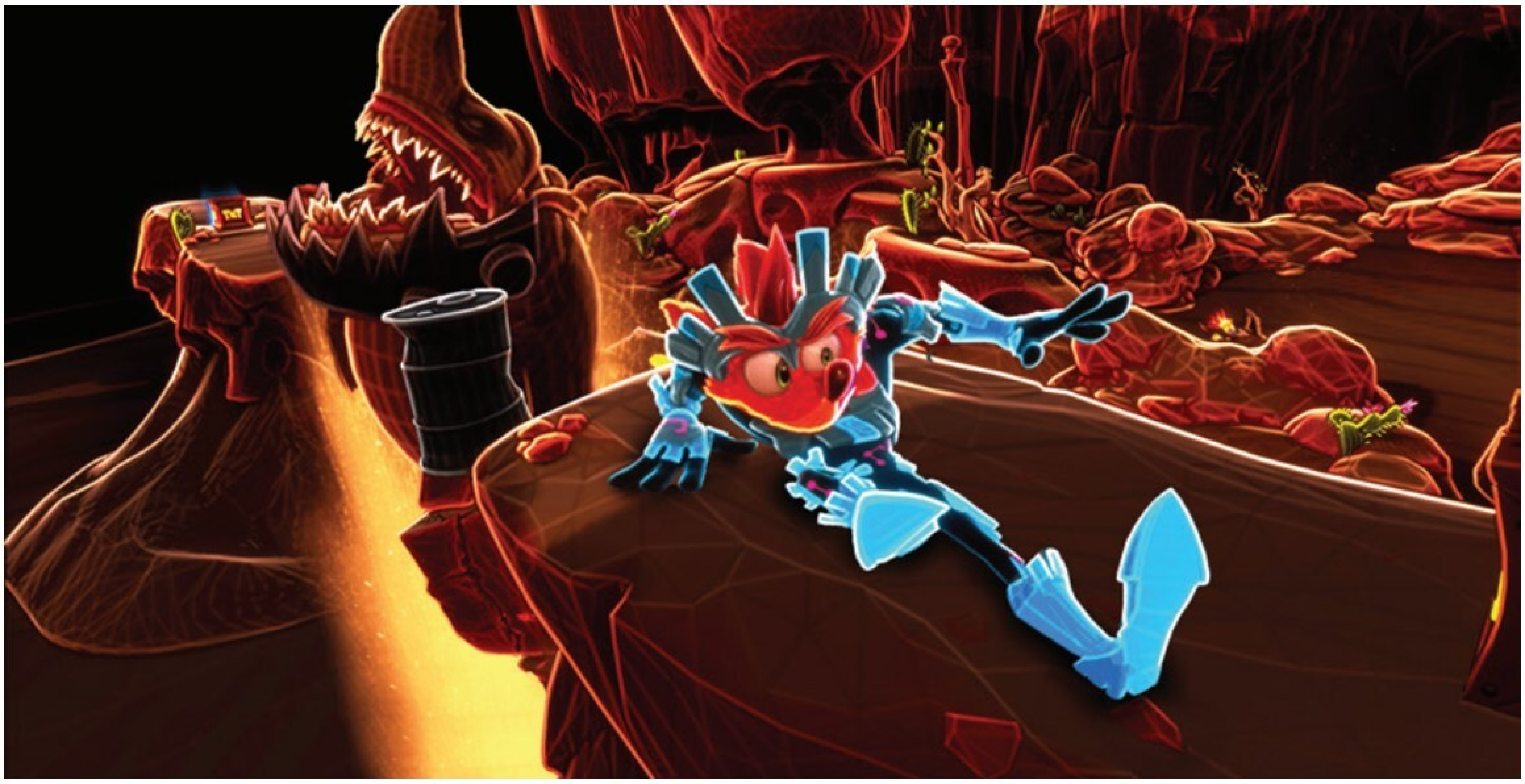
» **Graphics**
The vibrant, colorful visuals really pop, and enemy designs are goofy in a charming way

» **Sound**
This energetic soundtrack is fun and upbeat, which is good since you listen to some tracks on loop for a long time

» **Playability**
Controls are tight and precise, which is necessary given the pinpoint maneuvering required in some levels

» **Entertainment**
Mastering Crash's aerial acrobatics is highly rewarding, but the journey to get there is occasionally frustrating

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high



The early Crash Bandicoot games of the '90s were partially experiments in how to navigate 3D space. Crash didn't freely traverse an open world; he marched down tightly designed digital tunnels. The camera zoomed in and out of the action and panned around the character, which seemed novel at the time. However, Crash's movement was limited in ways that seem restrictive by today's standards. In some sense, Crash Bandicoot's gameplay was a product of those limits of technology as much as it was any single creative vision. And yet, those limitations helped produce one of 1996's most memorable platformers. Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time proves the classic formula still works in 2020.

With Crash 4, developer Toys for Bob sends Crash and his sister Coco on an adventure through space and time. In one set of levels, I battled seahorse-like pirates while dodging cannon fire. In another, I bounced off dinosaur heads and over creeping lava flows. In yet another, I navigated a busy skyway, miles above a futuristic metropolis. Every level is full of wacky sights and sounds that made me smile, and I couldn't wait to see where I was headed next.

However, this experience is more about the journey than the destination, and Crash's platforming remains faithful to his early adventures in ways both good and bad. On the one hand, the controls are more responsive than ever, and I loved bounding from one precarious platform to the next while smashing crates full of Wumpa fruit. On the other hand, Crash 4's precise platforming sequences demand practice. The thrill of mastering Crash 4's most challenging levels is rewarding, but some of the deadliest pitfalls come out of the blue, which means you have to replay sections over and over again to memorize each level's layout. A "modern" difficulty allows you to play with unlimited lives, which removes some of the sting, but distant checkpoints still tested my patience, as they forced me to routinely jump through familiar hoops in order to return to the platforming section that tripped me up.

While Crash's platforming feels like it fell out of a time warp, this bandicoot does have a few new moves. Throughout his journey, Crash collects a handful of Quantum Masks that grant him new superpowered abilities. For example, one mask allows you to invert gravity so Crash can run along the ceiling, while another lets you transform into a spinning vortex that floats over large chasms. I especially liked the Kupuna-Wa mask, which slows time, so I could platform across falling objects and dodge fast-moving projectiles. These masks pop in and out of the game at predetermined times, so you can't access them whenever you want, but I was always excited when one showed up. Even more, I'm impressed with how the Quantum Masks add new wrinkles to Crash's classic gameplay in a way that feels true to the spirit of the franchise.

In addition to the Quantum Masks, Crash and Coco are joined by a few unlikely cohorts, such as Doctor Neo Cortex, Dingodile, and Tawna. These new characters have their own unique movesets, which they display in a handful of dedicated levels scattered across the game. These special levels offer a refreshing change of pace. For example, Cortex can't double jump, so his levels center on using a gun to transform enemies into spongy platforms that launch him into the air. However, my favorite newcomer is Tawna, an alternate-reality version of Crash's love interest from the first game. Tawna comes equipped with a grappling hook that allows her to zip across massive gaps and smash crates from a distance, and I always jumped into her special levels the second I unlocked them.

In many ways, Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time feels like a game that shouldn't work. Single-player, mascot-driven, hardcore platformers are few and far between these days. Moreover, most franchises born in the mid-'90s have had to continually reboot themselves to match the tastes of an ever-changing market. At its core, Crash 4 remains rooted to the old way of doing things, but that's not a bad thing. The visuals are cleaner now and Crash has a few new gimmicks, but if you squint, Crash 4 looks like the same old platformer you've always loved. » **Ben Reeves**

Hades

The highs and lows of repetition

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Supergiant Games **Developer** Supergiant Games **Release** September 17 **Rating** RP

8.5

Switch • PC

Developer Supergiant Games is known for creating titles with rich narratives and sophisticated themes, and one of the great triumphs of Hades is how those elements are seamlessly integrated into a roguelite structure. Through a seemingly limitless array of character interactions and plot progression, Hades seeds its storytelling over many hours of repeated runs, as you lead your character along one attempted escape from hell to the next. In addition to weapon and character upgrades, new story insights are among the most satisfying rewards. But that also means that you'll be eager to see those plot threads resolve, and to do that, you should prepare for an especially long road.

Zagreus is the son of mighty Hades, who rules the realm of the dead with a barely controlled anger only matched by his insistence on total control. He's the definition of an overbearing father, and Zagreus' desire to strike out on his own feels as much like a family drama as the retelling of a familiar mythology. His quest to find a mother he's never known brings him into contact with a who's who of Olympus and the Greek ancient world, including Zeus, Athena, Achilles, and Medusa. The constantly shifting dynamics between these characters makes for great fun, from the sibling rivalry among the Olympians to reconnecting old flames like Orpheus and Eurydice, and I love the way story tidbits creep in both between action sequences and during them.

Each escape attempt encompasses a series of isometric arena battles, assaulting an impressive variety of enemies in throwdowns that demand precision and careful observation. The combat is fast-paced and challenging, nodding more to stylish action games like Devil May Cry than the isometric RPGs it resembles at first glance. The sense of adrenaline is always high, but there's also a potential for encounters to devolve into frantic button mashing as you spam every available attack to bring foes down before they can unleash their worst counters.

New weapons unlock regularly, and they dramatically change your playstyle, from the precision of the Heart-Seeking Bow to the furious melee dominance of the Twin Fists of Malphon. The most impressive design feat is how even the same weapon inevitably feels different on each run, as god-gifted boons alter and enhance individual armaments, spells, and other abilities. As I got into the rhythm of flowing from one death into my next attempt, I was consistently excited to see how my approach might change.

Among the many familiar names encountered, Zagreus gets to know the good-natured Sisyphus, who endlessly pushes a boulder up a hill he will never top, never complaining of his task. It's an appropriate allegory that speaks to the broader game, which kept me engaged thanks to its slow drip of character improvement and fiction, but along a path that felt increasingly Sisyphean the longer I played. I spent dozens of hours picking away at the various plot threads and chasing upgrades. It's enjoyable, but as the hours wear on, my interest in the same sequence of chambers wore thin. I longed for a wrap-up, even as the game demanded more escape attempts. Even after "winning," that tease continues for hours more before a proper conclusion.

The story is stretched across too many hours of play to maintain excitement throughout, but there's absolutely a rich bounty of content to uncover along the way. Hades is a massive game, with a wealth of additional discoveries to appease even the most hardcore. A "god mode" offers a gradual increase in damage resistance after each death, putting victory in reach for even those with a cap on their skills. On the other hand, risk-takers looking for more rewards can eventually access a way to increase the difficulty. Alternate boss fights, new weapon aspects, hidden storylines, and plenty more invite the player to get lost in Hades' potential. These variants and additional options provide life to the game, even after the charm of standard completion attempts begins to wear out.

Even serious engagement doesn't ensure story completion without many hours of investment, and only the most dedicated players will see the full spread of what Hades has to offer. But Supergiant's latest opus is a beautiful and thoughtful twist on Greek mythology, flipping these old stories on their head and transforming them into commentaries on modern relationships. High-octane action gameplay may pull you into hell for the first time, but I suspect you'll stay to find out about this eccentric and fascinating family.

» Matt Miller

» Concept
Fight your way out of hell over and over again as the son of Hades

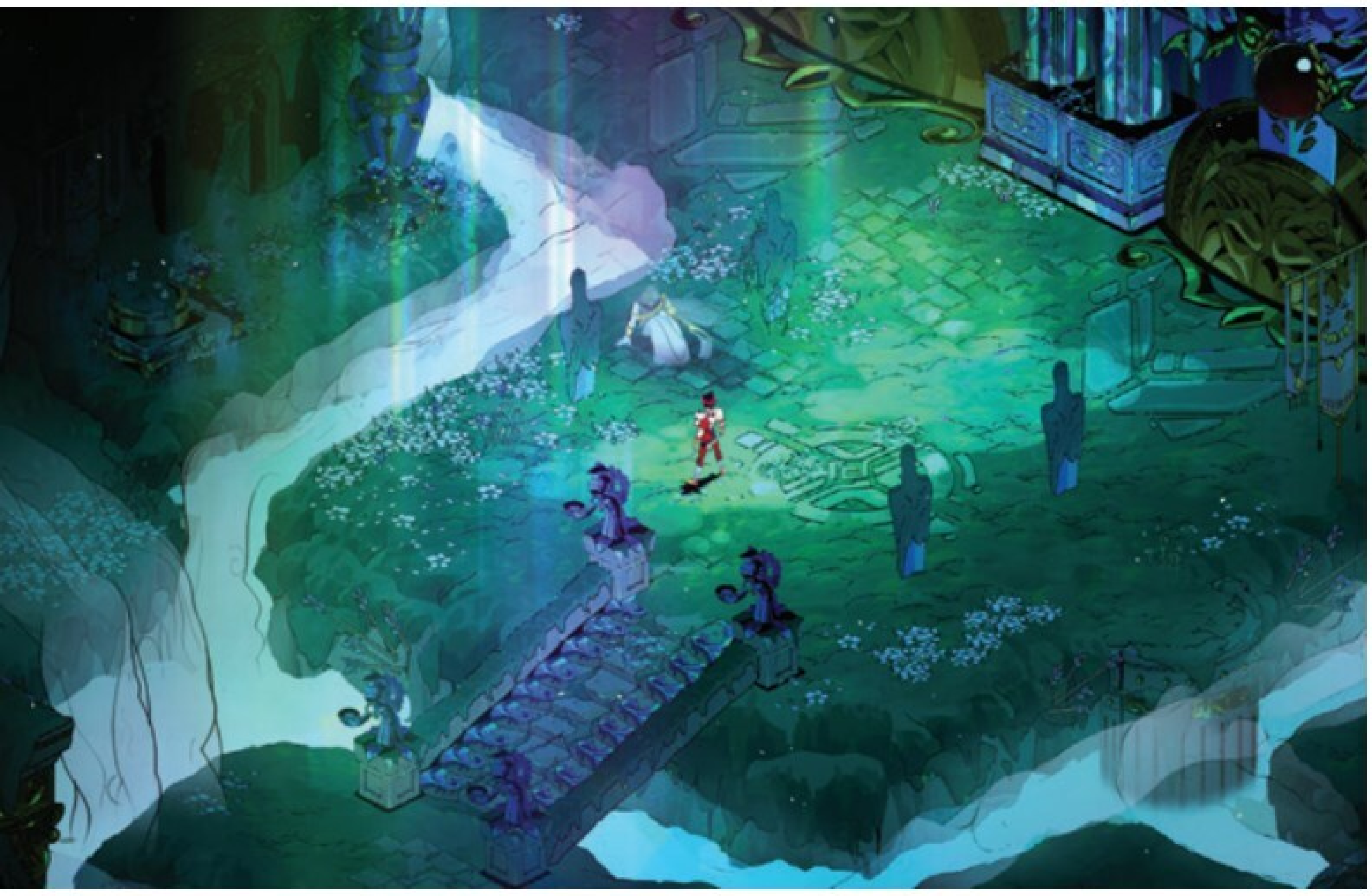
» Graphics
Stylish and painterly touches lend the action an exaggerated, animated aesthetic

» Sound
In keeping with Supergiant's heritage, excellent voice acting and dialogue create some wonderful characters. The high-octane musical score is fun, but can wear thin after several dozen runs

» Playability
Hades finds variety in its many weapons and playstyles, and each is balanced thoughtfully for a tight and challenging ride

» Entertainment
A cleverly reimagined take on Greek mythology with fast and challenging combat, but seeing it through to the end is an endurance challenge

» Replay Value
High



ZAGREUS
Prince of the Underworld

Greetings, Father. My ransacking was a delight, thank you for asking. So, I'll just be on my way, again.

Genshin Impact

Into the great wide open

9.25

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 330

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Mihoyo **Developer** Mihoyo **Release** September 28 **Rating** T

PS4 • PC
iOS • Android

» Concept
Explore a massive fantasy world while building a colorful cast of characters

» Graphics
The aesthetic is so captivating, I often just get lost in the art and scenery

» Sound
A stirring, powerful soundtrack accurately captures the sensation of sitting at a quiet pond or dueling a boss to the death

» Playability
Genshin Impact drip-feeds its systems slowly and succinctly, as critical features and mechanics are spread out over the first 10 hours

» Entertainment
This is an amazing smorgasbord of exploration, discovery, combat, and customization worthy of your attention – despite the presence of a predatory monetization model

» Replay Value
High

Genshin Impact is light on story and big on exploration, encouraging players to peek under every rock, glide from every precipice, and bash through every camp of goblins. This free-to-play, open-world action/RPG is an incredible amalgamation of stylish art and sound, easy-to-learn combat, and magical adventure around every corner. As you climb the highest peaks, take on titanic bosses, and spare moments of tranquility to take in the scenery, you are inundated with dozens of possibilities. Plenty of games serve up unending tasks, but Genshin Impact provides a sense of unyielding enchantment and desire that I rarely ever feel.

I'd put Genshin Impact down to head to bed, lay down, and find myself back playing moments later. The gameplay loop of collection, upgrading, and customization is captivating and compelling. Genshin Impact is an unending ball of adventurous yarn; pulling on any minute-long thread can lead you in unexpected directions for hours. Perhaps you're on a major story quest but see a chest in the distance, which leads to following a mysterious spirit down a cliffside and unearthing a rare cooking recipe. By the time all is said and done, time has evaporated and you forgot why you were even in the area in the first place. That's okay, though, because you solved a crane puzzle that sent you soaring through the mountainous air, rescued some travelers trapped in amber, and fought a lumbering mech for some spiffy new loot. The main quest is always there, but it's a struggle to stay focused on it as you run, glide, and climb. This world is an unparalleled beauty that hypnotizes and enthralls.

Dialogue and story are the weakest parts of the experience. It's completely okay to skip through most of the perfunctory dialogue as you hit the core quest chains to unlock certain areas and boss encounters. The real story here is created by your journey as you move from area to area. From rummaging through a field of carrots for food to accidentally wandering into a high-level encounter because the surrounding environment looked interesting, I never felt that tasks became rote.The gameplay can get grindy around 30 hours in, but is it really a grind if it still feels great?

You control a party of four characters, with one on the field at a time. Combat begins simple, with each character having a few different attacks, an elemental skill, and an ultimate elemental attack. Swapping out characters is an instant push of a button, which creates more dynamic and interesting combat system than basic button mashing. Using a water character to soak enemies and then quickly switching to an electro character to electrocute everyone is an effective use of elemental synergy, with more difficult encounters and time trials becoming hotbeds to try all sorts of elemental alchemy. In a fight with multiple minibosses present and a clock staring you down, it may take careful strategy to time your elements for maximum effect.

Elemental abilities aren't just for combat. The open world is full of puzzles and chests to test your creativity. Simple tasks like burning the brambles off an entrenched chest or using wind to blow the seeds off a dandelion are available in the opening moments, but later tasks involve multiple elements to trigger a variety of environmental interactions. Find yourself running out of stamina trying to swim across a vast expanse of water? Use ice to create a walkway. Create matter to trigger a pressure plate. Even late in the game, I'm still discovering new ways to use abilities.

Up to four players can team up together, with cross-platform drop-in, drop-out gameplay. Co-op is easy to use, and a fun way to fight bosses and do mini-dungeon experiences. Or maybe you just want to hang out, watch some ducks, and take some screenshots. Co-op is an exciting addition, but everything in the game can be done and enjoyed solo.

My biggest reservation about Genshin Impact is the monetization model, which is organized in a way that mobile gamers are intimately familiar with. In the West, we liken the "gachapon" system to loot boxes. But these loot boxes aren't merely for cosmetic hats; they're for playable characters and awesome weapons. Genshin Impact features pay-for-power and pay-for-convenience. Genshin Impact has a battle pass that doesn't even appear until around 20 hours into the game. This gambling for characters and weapons is further exacerbated by its deliberate methods, like having the all-star heroes join your group for certain quests, allowing you to experience their awesome powers, creating a desire to spin the wheels for a shot at that power.

This is a monetization model that I cannot endorse or advocate, but I also have not spent any real money in my 40+ hours with the game. I do not feel like my progress has been throttled or my enjoyment dampened because I haven't paid up. I have played many gacha games, and while Genshin Impact's paywall is the least intrusive of all of them, I can't pretend that the game wouldn't be better without it.

Genshin Impact is a whimsical, wondrous land dripping with unbridled charm and appeal, combining a ridiculously compelling reward loop with unfettered, continuous discovery. In this world I felt like a child visiting a theme park for the first time – dazzled, mesmerized, and completely swept away. I only wish the shimmering glow wasn't marred by a ghoulish monetization model, but that's something I'm willing to overlook for my ticket to this fascinating realm. **» Daniel Tack**

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with the print issue to follow

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WEBSLING THIS SPIDER-MAN TRIVIA

Think you're ready to wall-crawl like the real Spider-Man? As Peter and Miles would tell you, it's as much about the smarts as the brawn. Complete this Spider-Man video game trivia to see if you're ready to swing into action.

by Matt Miller

1. In the very first Spider-Man video game published for the Atari 2600 in 1982, which of these was not an element of gameplay?

A. Scaling a skyscraper
B. Defusing bombs
C. Fighting Green Goblin
D. Saving Mary Jane Watson

2. Which studio (later known for its work on Call of Duty) developed the much-lauded Spider-Man 2 game for PlayStation?

A. Infinity Ward
B. Treyarch
C. Raven Software
D. Sledgehammer Games

3. Spider-Man appeared in a 2005 fighting game where he and other Marvel heroes faced off against a new slate of characters introduced by Electronic Arts. What was its subtitle?

A. New Age of Heroes
B. Next Dimension
C. Battle for New York
D. Rise of the Imperfects

4. Spider-Man famously nailed rail-grinds and kickflips as an unlockable character in which skateboarding release?

A. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2
B. Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam
C. Tony Hawk's American Wasteland
D. Tony Hawk's Underground

5. 2010's Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions included Spidey characters from multiple universes. Which one of these Spider-Man heroes was among the playable leads?

A. Miles Morales
B. Gwen Stacy
C. Ben Reilly
D. Miguel O'Hara

6. Spider-Man teamed up with the X-Men in a 1992 SNES game to take on which supervillain?

A. Magneto
B. Doctor Doom
C. Arcade
D. Venom

7. In 2018's Spider-Man, Peter Parker befriends Miles Morales and convinces him to help out where?

A. The Daily Bugle
B. A homeless shelter
C. OsCorp
D. Spider-House

8. Which of these is not the name of a Spider-Man video game?

A. Spider-Man: Toxic City
B. The Amazing Spider-Man: Web of Fire
C. Spider-Man: Friend or Foe
D. Spider-Man: Maximum Venom

9. Spider-Man is just one of over 300 characters who can fight ________ as the final boss in Lego Marvel Super Heroes 2.

A. Kang the Conqueror
B. Loki
C. Galactus
D. Lex Luthor

10. Spider-Man, Spider-Man, ________________.

A. makes a lot of Spider-Jam.
B. he's a real anchorman.
C. does whatever a spider can.
D. is based on a real person who lived in New York in the 1970s, man.

SCORING:

9 TO 10 POINTS:	7 TO 8 POINTS:	5 TO 6 POINTS:	3 TO 4 POINTS:	1 TO 2 POINTS:
You are truly master of the Spider-Verse	Close, but not quite there, Spider-Ham	If you'd just moved a little faster, you could have saved Gwen!	Doomed to transform into a giant lizard	Remember the dance number in Spider-Man 3? You're that guy

Answers: 1.D, 2.B, 3.D, 4.A, 5.D, 6.C, 7.B, 8.D, 9.A, 10.C

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